

Beyond Transavantgarde. Art in Italy in the 1980s.

Stefano Perrini

Executive Master in Art Market Studies, University of Zurich.

Poststrasse 9,
CH 8808, Pfäffikon, SZ

+4179 575 76 89

stefano.perrini@gmail.com

April 2015

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Julia Gelshorn

Director of Studies: Dr. Nicolas Galley

Statement of authorship

I hereby certify that this master thesis has been composed by myself, and describes my own work, unless otherwise acknowledged in the text. All references and verbatim extracts have been quoted, and all sources of information have been specifically acknowledged. This master thesis has not been accepted in any previous application for a degree.

We could say that every period has its own postmodernism, just as every period would have its own mannerism (and, in fact, I wonder if postmodernism is not the modern name for mannerism as metahistorical category). [...] The past conditions us, harries us, blackmails us. The historic avant-garde (but here I would also consider avant-garde a metahistorical category) tries to settle scores with the past. [...] The avant-garde destroys, defaces the past [...].

But the moment comes when the avant-garde (the modern) can go no further, because it has produced a metalanguage that speaks of its impossible texts (conceptual art). The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently. I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, "I love you madly," because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly." At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her, but he loves her in an age of lost innocence. If the woman goes along with this, she will have received a declaration of love all the same. Neither of the two speakers will feel innocent, both will have accepted the challenge of the past, of the already said, which cannot be eliminated; both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony... But both will have succeeded, once again, in speaking of love.¹

Umberto Eco

¹ *The Name of the Rose*; New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1984, New edition 2014, p. 570–571.

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1. Introduction

Art history is simplified. It is inevitable: too many artists during too many centuries; some of them are left behind, in some cases to be rediscovered later, thanks to the good work of some specialized academic or passionate connoisseur.

After less than forty years, the process of simplification has already been applied to the artistic situation in Italy during the 1980s. The common way to describe what happened in Italy is the following: in 1979 art critic Achille Bonito Oliva (1939) gathered a group of young artists, theorizing the movement called *Transavantgarde* ("Transavanguardia" in Italian), which, as a reaction to *Arte Povera* (and to Conceptual art in general), rediscovered the pleasure of painting and dominated the scene for at least ten years after their participation in the 1980 Venice Biennale.

This is more or less the impression one has when consulting general, unspecialized sources. Actually, it is more or less the version that Bonito Oliva managed to impose. The present work aims at restoring, at least partially, the complexity of what happened in Italy in that decade. It will be discovered that in Italy the return to painting was not determined by the artists belonging to *Transavantgarde*, but it happened some years earlier, thanks to three important forerunners: Luigi Ontani (1943), Salvo (1947) and Carlo Maria Mariani (1931). These artists developed from their experiences with *Arte Povera* and Conceptual art. Their decision to return to painting therefore cannot really be seen as a reaction to this kind of art, but rather its natural evolution.

With a closer look, *Transavantgarde* was something artificial, created by Bonito Oliva with the market in mind. He restricted the membership only to five artists; thanks to his indubitable keenness, he imposed them and the *Transavanguardia* brand on the international scene. The operation worked very well in the short term, but it showed its side effects in the long term. The major problem was that the five artists selected by Bonito Oliva were not

necessarily the best representatives Italy could offer at the time. In addition, the creation of an exclusive club denied the possibility of renewing and stimulating new talents and ideas. Bonito Oliva was probably aware of the issues and, after the initial saturation strategy, he has vainly tried to stick the Transavantgarde label on everything he came into contact with.² As a final result, while the Transavantgarde group had no real evolution, some other Italian artists, who were even more interesting, did not have an opportunity to be recognized out of Italy, where such a brand had become a synonym for Italian art in the 1980s. Thus, the international consideration for the Transavantgard artists has probably decreased with time, but different gems produced in Italy in the decade have not been discovered yet. Actually, there were many other artistic groups in Italy, mostly put together by critics, and a real religion war. As noted by curator Jean-Christophe Ammann (1939) in Italy typically “the artists ‘serve’ the critics in establishing and demarcating their position of power.”³ Bonito Oliva won the war and history is always written by the victors, but maybe time has come to reconsider the whole period. By the way, few sources and no real survey of the artistic scene in Italy in the 1980s are available in English. The present work can therefore partially fill a gap.

As far as the organization of the text is concerned, the next paragraphs of the present introduction provide the necessary background in order to better frame the period and the related social, cultural and historical context. Transavantgarde is analysed in the second chapter. The main antagonist movement, called *Nuovi-nuovi* (literally, The New New-ones) is the subject of chapter three. The two major artists of the period, Ontani and Salvo, are also included there for the sake of simplicity, even if they were very independent figures. Carlo Maria Mariani and the group of Anachronists are considered in chapter four, while the main other groups are studied in chapter five. In the

² Art critic and curator Francesco Bonami (1955) coined the expression ‘Eternal Transavanguardia’ to describe Bonito Oliva’s attitude. See Mastrantonio/Bonami 2008 Luca Mastrantonio and Francesco Bonami, *Irrazionalpopolare*; Turin, Einaudi, 2008, p. 19.

³ Ammann 1980 Jean-Christophe Ammann, *The Exhibition. Different Times*; Basel, Kunsthalle; republished in: *Transavanguardia*, ed. by Ida Gianelli; Milan, Skira, 2002, p. 293.

end some considerations on the market valuations for these artists are conducted in chapter six.

1.1 Periodization

The title of the present work refers to 'the 1980s'. Dividing history into decades is a common practice, almost a convention, but it always creates some issue. In art, the decade is apparently well defined between two milestones: the Venice Biennale in 1980 that determined international success for post-modern and neo-expressionistic tendencies, and the exhibition *Les Magiciens de la Terre* (Magicians of the World) at the Centre Pompidou in 1989 that exhibiting non-Western works focused new attention on the problem of postcolonial legacy and multicultural art.⁴ In practice, however, in order to understand Italian postmodern art it is necessary to turn back the clock of history. It could be said that the 1980s began in Milan in 1974 with an exhibition that had a title, which recalled an essay by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995): *Ripetizione differente* (Different repetition).⁵ The show was curated by Renato Barilli (1935), who later created the Nuovi-nuovi group and became Bonito Oliva's archenemy. Probably, the 1980s ended on October 2, 1985, when American star Rock Hudson (1925) passed away, becoming the first major celebrity to die from an AIDS-related illness. For sure, the 1980s were over a few months later, on April 26, when the Chernobyl nuclear reactor disaster occurred. These two events put the Western world in a completely different mood, affecting all artistic expressions.

⁴ For further considerations around the exhibition held in Paris, see Foster/Krauss/Bois/Buchloch/Joselit 2008 Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and David Joselit, *Art since 1900. Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*; London, Thames & Hudson, 2008, p. 661–665.

⁵ Exhibition held at Studio Marconi. The text in the catalogue was republished in Barilli 1979 Renato Barilli, *Informale, oggetto, comportamento*; Milan, Feltrinelli, 1979, 2nd vol., p. 106–126.

To summarize, it can be said that the present work, in the attempt of analysing what is commonly considered art in Italy during the 1980s, is mainly focused on the period from 1974 to 1985.

1.2 From the Years of Lead to a New Political Context

The expression 'Years of Lead' is used in Italy to refer to the historical period between 1969 and 1980, when the exacerbated political climate resulted in violence in the streets and acts of terrorism (fig. 1).⁶



Figure 1 Snapshot during the events that caused policeman Antonio Custra's death in Milan, 14 May 1977.

During this tragic period 428 people were killed in Italy.⁷ A key year was 1977, when the city of Bologna became the scene of violent street clashes; a new student movement was born, the so-called Movement of 1977. Almost 10 years after the protests of 1968, a new generation of students was asking for a university reform, but actually questioning the entire establishment. While in other university cities violence started from the beginning, in Bologna, possibly because of the presence of the DAMS⁸ and its students, processions had been

⁶ The expression probably originates from the Italian title given to the 1981 movie *Marianne and Juliane* by Margarethe von Trotta on similar issues experienced by West Germany in those same years.

⁷ See VV. AA. 1999 VV.AA., *XX Secolo. Dal 1900 al nuovo millennio*; Novara, De Agostini, 1999, Vol. 8, p. 140.

⁸ DAMS is an Italian acronym for *Discipline delle Arti, della Musica e dello Spettacolo*. It corresponds to the English: Disciplines of Arts, Music and Entertainment. It was founded at the end of 1970 within the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Bologna. It was the first Italian academic experiment course leading to a full degree dedicated to topics such as entertainment, music and arts in general.

characterized by joyful and peaceful expressions of creativity. The dramatic turning point occurred on March 11, when a student was mortally wounded by a gunshot probably fired by a policeman.⁹ This event triggered a long series of clashes with security forces that lasted for two days, affecting the entire city. The interior Minister Francesco Cossiga (1928–2010) made the decision, unprecedented in the history of the Italian Republic, to send armoured carriers to Bologna, in order to defend the university area and prevent guerrilla warfare (fig. 2). As a consequence, many people were arrested.¹⁰



Figure 2 Armoured carriers in the centre of Bologna, March 1977.

⁹ *Lotta Continua*, one of the major formations of the extra-parliamentary Italian left, had organized a protest against an assembly of the catholic group *Comunione e Liberazione*, held that morning at the university. On that occasion, Francesco Lorusso (1952–1977), student and member of *Lotta Continua*, got killed.

¹⁰ On March 12, 1977 the free radio station *Radio Alice* was closed by the police and all the people found in the broadcasting site were arrested under the accusation (later proved to be false) of having directed the clashes through the aired programs. Founded at the end of 1975 by some DAMS students, *Radio Alice* had been one of the first Italian free radio stations; they had decided to open the microphone to anyone, with no censure. The station became a means of cultural production, covering a myriad of subjects, from social protests to poetry, from yoga lessons to classical music. The way of working with no palimpsest and the breaking of barriers to participation of common people to mass media constituted a very interesting experiment in a country like Italy that, to put it mildly, was not leading the way in mass media communication.

In September a conference on repression was organized in Bologna following a call signed by some French intellectuals.¹¹ The hard conflicts that emerged inside the movement during the conference probably marked its end as a political movement.

The terrorist climax was reached in 1978, when former Italian Christian Democratic Prime Minister Aldo Moro (1916–1978) was kidnapped and killed after 55 days of captivity (fig. 3), by the Red Brigades (BR) – a Marxist–Leninist urban guerrilla organization. It was a real shock for Italy and it marked the beginning of the end for political terrorist organizations, due to the lack of social and political consensus and the adoption of special laws to defeat them.



Figure 3 Aldo Moro's body found in the trunk of a red Renault 4 in Rome, 9 May 1978.

But the new decade opened with the most tragic terrorist event: the so-called Bologna Massacre. On 2 August 1980 a time-bomb was placed in the Central Station: 85 people were killed and more than 200 injured (fig. 4).¹²

¹¹ Amongst the intellectuals who promoted the conference: Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), Paul-Michel Foucault (1926–1984) and Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995).

¹² For further details see, for instance, VV. AA. 1999 (cf. note 7), Vol. 9, p. 22–23.



Figure 4 Bologna Massacre, 2 August 1980.

In November of the same year an earthquake in Southern Italy caused the death of 2,914 people and left 300,000 homeless (fig. 5).¹³ After so many tragedies and social struggles, and after an extremely politicized decade, it is no wonder people started looking for political disengagement and individualism. In the 1980s, the process of transformation from citizens to consumers, which started after the end of WWII, reached completion. Professor Massimiliano Panarari (1971) noted:

After the Years of Lead [...], the greedy discovery of consumerism made by the average Italian will act like an electric shock [...], producing a real anthropologic revolution. It will be the inevitable outcome of a season, where

¹³ It is known in Italy as *Terremoto dell'Irpinia* (Irpinian earthquake). The first jolt occurred on Sunday 23 November at 19:35 local time, measuring about 7 on the Richter scale. For further reading, see VV. AA. 1999 (cf. note 7), Vol. 9, p. 24–25.

[...] the Country has been inoculated with the germs of social Darwinism and egoism [...].¹⁴



Figure 5 Irpinia Earthquake, 23 November 1980.

The political scenario was changing and in 1981, for the first time in Italy since the end of WWII, a politician not belonging to the Christian Democratic Party was appointed Prime Minister.¹⁵ There was an ongoing process of secularization in Italy, a country deeply influenced by the Catholic Church, made evident by the referendum on the divorce law in 1974, where almost 60% of voters decided in favour of the right to divorce.¹⁶ Such a process opened the doors to the subsequent rise of Bettino Craxi (1934–2000) and his

¹⁴ Translation of the author, from: Panarari 2010 Massimiliano Panarari, *L'egemonia sottoculturale. L'Italia da Gramsci al gossip*; Turin, Einaudi, 2010, p. 33.

¹⁵ Giovanni Spadolini (1925–1994), chairman of the Republican Party since 1979.

¹⁶ The Law on divorce had been introduced in 1970, but Christian groups petitioned for a referendum to abolish it. The referendum was held on 12 May 1974. The question posed to voters was: "Do you want the Law of 1 December 1970, No. 898, on the regulation of cases of dissolution of marriage, to be abrogated?" The referendum was defeated by margin of 59.3% to 40.7% on a voter turnout of 87.7% out of 37 million eligible voters, thus allowing the divorce laws to remain in force.

Socialist Party. Craxi, chairman of the party since 1976, was the Italian Prime Minister from 1983 to 1987. Craxi literally marked the 1980s in Italy and played a key role in the change of its society. His project was to distance his party away from the communist ideology, but while keeping a reformist profile. His liberal vision and his recipes to modernize Italy anticipated the 'Third way' adopted years later by the English New Labour party. However, in Italy Craxi was often perceived more as a conservative leader, following a paradigm similar to the one fostered in the same years by Ronald Reagan (1911–2004) and Margaret Thatcher (1925–2013).

The role of intellectuals has always been a central question in Italy. In his unfinished works, it was carefully analysed by Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), who coined the expression 'cultural hegemony' to explain the reason why a proletarian revolution was not supposed to inevitably happen, like Karl Marx (1818–1883) believed. Cultural hegemony is the ideological control on society by the ruling class, which manipulates the values, the perceptions and the beliefs of that society, so that their ruling-class worldview becomes the worldview that is imposed and accepted as the cultural *status quo*. Thus, the role of intellectuals becomes fundamental for the exercise of power. Craxi was well aware of that and he knew that a large majority of Italian intellectuals were close to the Italian Communist Party, the largest communist party in Western Europe. So, he applied a sort of a spoils system, rewarding a new generation of young intellectuals. Both Bonito Oliva and Barilli, who were the protagonists of the season of the 1980s in visual arts, were very close to the Socialist Party. To them, a third name should be added: architect Paolo Portoghesi (1931), who was appointed director of the Venice Biennale in 1979. He organized the first edition of the Biennale of Architecture, significantly entitled *The presence of the Past*, where postmodernism was officially introduced in Italy (fig. 6).



Figure 6 Views of 'Strada Novissima' at the 1st Venice Biennale of Architecture published by *Domus*.

But the Socialist Party was also very interested in achieving a hegemony in mass culture.¹⁷ Above all, they understood the key role played by television and promoted a process of liberalization of the television channels.¹⁸ New-channels, privately-owned, became available to the Italian audience.¹⁹ Such channels, financed by advertising, were central in the triumph of consumerism.

Also the art promoted by the Socialists was more apt to be consumed: understandable without much effort or headaches, easy to be placed in houses

¹⁷ In 1967 French philosopher Guy Debord (1931–1994) had published the seminal essay *La Société du Spectacle*.

¹⁸ Tycoon Silvio Berlusconi (1936), a friend of Craxi's, built in these years his television empire. After the scandals that killed the Socialist Party and forced Craxi to leave Italy at the beginning of the 1990s, Berlusconi became Prime Minister in 1994 and polarized the political scene in Italy for more than 20 years.

¹⁹ Also the remote control was becoming popular and widespread. It allowed the so-called zapping, a new way to enjoy images that probably influenced the way new artists were using images and sources. Other technical developments had impacts. For instance, Italy was one of the last Countries to adopt colour television, in 1977. This played a role in the rediscover of colour in art. Moreover, in the 1980s the VHS recording technology became common in many houses, contributing to new habits: instead of socializing in cinemas, many Italians would rather stay at home, where movies were becoming available. For further reading, see Volli 2009 Ugo Volli, *Televisione e televisioni*, in: *Gli anni 80. Una prospettiva italiana*, ed. by Marco Meneguzzo; Milan, Silvana Editoriale, 2009.

and with no disturbing ideology. And Bonito Oliva, a frequent guest on television, was very clever in using the tools of media culture, with no snobby attitude. In April 1981, the magazine *Frigidaire* published a famous interview with him. The interview was accompanied by photos of the critic, who was then professor of Art History in Rome, completely naked, posing like an ancient Roman (fig. 7).²⁰ If the photos were a predictable scandal, the content of the interview was quite shocking. In it Bonito Oliva confessed that he had invented himself as a critic and identified Modern Art itself as the art of inventing oneself.²¹



Figure 7 Achille Bonito Oliva, *Frigidaire* #6, 1981.

²⁰ *Frigidaire* was a revolutionary comics magazine created in 1980 by Vincenzo Sparagna in the spirit of the Movement of 1977. He gathered the group of excellent cartoonists coming from the brief experience of the magazine *Cannibale*, with the idea of producing not only comics, but something different from what had been already seen in newsstands. The title *Frigidaire* referred to a container capable to hold everything. As the name of the main producer of coolers, it was also the parody of all the brands that were invading people's lives. For further reading, refer to Sparagna 2008 Vincenzo Sparagna, *Frigidaire. L'incredibile storia e le sorprendenti avventure della più rivoluzionaria rivista d'arte del mondo*; Milan, BUR/RCS Libri, 2008.

²¹ In 1989, recidivist Bonito Oliva repeated the interview with no clothes, but this time, a tangible sign of the achieved and established success, he earned the cover of the magazine.

The mood and all the ingredients of the 1980s: the Socialist Party and their stronghold Milan, yuppies, consumerism, cocktails and nightlife were condensed in an advertising slogan, unfortunately impossible to be translated into English, which became a legendary, idiomatic expression to characterize the decade in Italy: “*Milano da bere*” (fig. 8).²²



Figure 8 Famous Amaro Ramazzotti's advertising campaign, 1985.

²² It is almost impossible to translate such a slogan, capturing all the social, political and cultural nuances. It could be translated as “Milan in a drink”, or “Milan in sips”. The expression has now become a byword for a place where, under the sleek, glittering surface of fashion and new money, there was, and is, a world of unprincipled young yuppies, unscrupulous businessmen, ignorant parvenus and corrupt politicians. The original advertising campaign was created for Amaro Ramazzotti by Marco Mignani (1944–2008) in 1985.

1.3 Postmodernism

The term 'postmodernism' is a much-disputed word; a thorough disquisition on it would be impossible here, but it is necessary to define it briefly.

*Like modernism, postmodernism does not designate any one style of art. Rather, its most ambitious theorists have used the term to mark a new epoch in the West. For the American critic Fredric Jameson [...] the postmodern is less a clean break with the modern than an uneven development of old (or 'residual') and new (or 'emergent') elements. Nevertheless, it is distinct enough to 'periodize' as a new moment in culture in relation to a new stage in capitalism, often called 'consumer capitalism' [...].*²³

The term 'postmodernism' was first used at the end of the nineteenth century, but it became prominent in architecture after 1966, when Robert Venturi (1925) published *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. Against the modernist lessons, his motto was: "Less is a bore".²⁴

The use of the word 'postmodern' in philosophy was thus neither the prime nor the principal. Nevertheless, philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998) contributed a lot to its diffusion, with the publication of the seminal essay *The Postmodern Condition* in 1979.²⁵ Lyotard affirms that in the postmodern condition the grand narratives that characterized the modern era are no longer credible. A grand (also meta-) narrative is a large-scale philosophic theory, a way to conceive human history.²⁶ Amongst such narratives, Lyotard distinguishes the three most important ones. According to Enlightenment, history implied a positive, progressing acquisition of knowledge that allowed

²³ Foster/Krauss/Bois/Buchloch/Joselit 2008 (cf. note 4), p. 640.

²⁴ German-American architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969), a master of Modernism, had famously stated: "Less is more", affirming the supremacy of functionalism and rationalism.

²⁵ The complete, original title was *La Condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir* (The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge). It was a sociologic research commissioned by the Canadian Government, aimed at investigating the condition of knowledge in modern, industrially advanced societies. The Italian edition is: Lyotard 1979 Jean-François Lyotard, *La condizione postmoderna*; Milan, Feltrinelli, 2014.

²⁶ The importance of the narrative element was remarked by another great French philosopher, Paul Ricœur (1913–2005). Our existences are better understandable by means of a narrative than of a logical argument.

the possession of the material world through the development of science and technology.²⁷ According to Idealism, human history had to correspond to a development of consciousness.²⁸ Marxism was something in between the other two narratives, since it was pursuing an idealistic ambition, the end of alienation, but through a materialistic process.

For different reasons, such schemes had all failed, being replaced by incredulity and scepticism towards universalizing theories. Such grand narratives had guided choices and determined behaviours; without them, only small, local narratives are possible, based on a local rationality with a limited validity, based on rules with no general applicability.

Important contributions to the theory initiated by Lyotard also came from Italy, mainly from philosopher Gianni Vattimo (1936). He also noted that the post-modern condition, as suggested by Lyotard, was indeed a meta-narrative, in so proving that human beings need narratives to give a rational sense to their actions.²⁹ Later, Vattimo developed what he called 'Weak Thought'.³⁰ The basic idea is that history shows a tendency towards dissolution of strong powers. Strong structures get weak as time goes by.³¹

Such a background was reflected in postmodern art, characterized by the absence of a true, universally valid style or medium, and by the scepticism

²⁷ In Lyotard's interpretation, such a narrative, having its roots in the eighteenth century philosophy, corresponds practically to Positivism, founded by Auguste Comte (1798–1857).

²⁸ The idealistic narrative was developed by the great German philosophers of the nineteenth century: Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854) and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831).

²⁹ See Vattimo 1985 Gianni Vattimo, *La fine della modernità*; Milan, Garzanti, 2011.

³⁰ In Italian: 'Pensiero debole'. The theory was developed together with philosopher Pier Aldo Rovatti (1942). See Vattimo/Rovatti 1983 Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti (eds.), *Il pensiero debole*; Milan, Feltrinelli, 2011.

³¹ Possible examples provided by Vattimo are monarchies in pre-modern and postmodern world or the once strong, compact individual deconstructed by Freud's psychological theories. Interestingly enough, according to critic and philosopher Arthur C. Danto (1924–2013), an analogous scheme applies also to art. He wrote: "The great movements of the 1960s were for the most part efforts at de-exalting art, bringing art down to earth. Pop certainly attempted to obliterate the distinction between fine and demotic art. Minimalism was an effort to obliterate the distinction between the handmade and the manufactured. Fluxus obliterated the distinction between creativity and play. Conceptual art obliterated the idea that art need even be an object." From: Danto 2007 Arthur C. Danto, *Pattern and Decoration as a Late Modernist Movement*, in: *Pattern and Decoration: An Ideal Vision in American Art*, ed. by Anne Swartz; New York, Hudson River Museum, 2007, p. 7.

towards the idea, proper of avant-gardes, of an evolutionism in art history. Decoration, multiplicity, inconsistency, hybridization, ephemerality became suitable words in art.

1.4 The International Scene

The forerunners of postmodernism in art, seeking a way out of the rigidity of formalist and conceptualist attitudes, formed a group in America around 1974, called Pattern and Decoration (P&D).³² New York gallerist Holly Solomon promoted the group. Interest in their work was strong in Europe, with gallerists like Bruno Bischofberger in Zurich pursuing them. Professor Anne Swartz wrote:

*This movement is one of the last of modernism and one of the first of postmodernism. [...] P&D offers a lexicon of images through which many past sensibilities have been filtered. Its artists challenged presumptions about the definitions of art versus craft, West versus East, and inclusion versus expansion [...]. They made it possible for countless subsequent artists to use pattern, decoration, and ornament, and their innovations and concerns continue to resonate in the art world today.*³³

That several of the main artists of P&D were women is surprising, but, as Arthur C. Danto said: "Though P&D had more women than most art movements, all of them feminists and some very active in feminist causes, it was not a feminist movement. Feminism was but one of its roots."³⁴ Speaking of which, it is worth noticing here that no women are significantly present on the Italian scene in the 1980s.³⁵ This tells a lot about the status of women in

³² The main components were: Cynthia Carlson (1942), Brad Davis (1942), Valerie Jaudon (1945), Jane Kaufman (1938), Joyce Kozloff (1942), Robert Kushner (1949), Kim McConnell (1946), Tony Robbin (1943), Miriam Schapiro (1923), Ned Smyth (1948), and Robert Zakanitch (1935).

³³ Swartz 2007 Anne Swartz, *Pattern and Decoration: An Ideal Vision in American Art*; New York, Hudson River Museum, 2007, p. 12.

³⁴ Danto 2007 (cf. note 31), p. 9.

³⁵ Investigating the reasons for the absence of significant women in the Italian art of the 1980s is a huge matter that would deserve a specific study. It is not possible to discuss it here.

Italy, where the female model conveyed by television is a mere object of desire of men.³⁶ Incidentally, two important artists for the 1980s like Enzo Cucchi (1949) and Georg Baselitz (1938) have explicitly expressed their sexist ideas on women and art.³⁷

Back to P&D after this digression, it must be said that unfortunately the group is nowadays widely underestimated, if not forgotten.³⁸

The major trend in international art was a break from the excessively dematerialized and overly ideological art of the early 1970s; it could be generally defined as a neo-expressionistic tendency, even if it assumed many and various names in different geographical places.

In the United States it was called Neo-Expressionism or Bad Painting, as defined by Marcia Tucker in 1978:

*'Bad Painting' is an ironic title for 'good painting', which is characterized by deformation of the figure, a mixture of art-historical and non-art resources, and fantastic and irreverent content. In its disregard for accurate representation and its rejection of conventional attitudes about art, 'bad' painting is at once funny and moving, and often scandalous in its scorn for the standards of good taste.*³⁹

³⁶ The exploitation and the showing of the female body in television broadcasts is still a much debated topic in Italy. A shocking documentary on the matter, entitled *The Body of Women*, was curated by Lorella Zanardo (1957) in 2009.

³⁷ Enzo Cucchi said: "Women have the great privilege not to be artists. [...] This is history. History selects well, calmly. [...] Artists miss something women have, the possibility of procreating. [...] Women have no necessity of making art. That is why they have the great privilege not to be artists." Translation of the author, from: D'Ercole 2014 Carlos D'Ercole, *Vita sconnessa di Enzo Cucchi*; Macerata, Quodlibet, 2014, p. 125–126.

In an interview, Georg Baselitz affirmed: "Women simply don't pass the test. [...] The market test, the value test. [...] Women don't paint very well. It's a fact. [...] And that despite the fact that they still constitute the majority of students in the art academies." See Beyer/Knöfel 2013 Susanne Beyer and Ulrike Knöfel, *German Artist Georg Baselitz: 'My Paintings are Battles'*, in issue 4/2013 of *Der Spiegel*; Hamburg, Spiegel-Verlag, 2013, available in English at <http://www.spiegel.de/>, last access 25.04.15.

³⁸ Arthur C. Danto commented: "However much the P&D artists contributed to the understanding and practice of art, their movement has remained fairly obscure." See Danto 2007 (cf. note 31), p. 10.

³⁹ Tucker 1978 Tucker Marcia, *'Bad' Painting*; New York, New Museum Press Release, 1978, available at <http://archive.newmuseum.org/>, last access on 08.04.15.

The most important artists were Eric Fischl (1948), Robert Longo (1953), David Salle (1952), Julian Schnabel (1951) and two women often reported under the label 'New Image Painting': Jennifer Bartlett (1941) and Susan Rothenberg (1945).

When the field of play is made of past and citation, old Europe is advantaged. Nevertheless, in America there were other fruitful postmodern tendencies, even if with less or no connections to the Italian scene. Graffiti was probably the best American expression during this period.⁴⁰ Appropriation art was a new conceptual movement, whose philosophy was close to some groups operating in Italy, where nevertheless nothing so radical was ever produced, apart from the case of Ontani, a genial precursor.⁴¹ Other neo-geometrical and neo-objectual trends had almost no equivalent in Italy.⁴²

Europe was dominated by this neo-expressionistic or neo-fauve mood, corresponding to a generalized return to painting, with the exception of the United Kingdom, where the best artists were sculptors.⁴³ Honestly, in Germany artists had never given up painting, even if a new name was coined to characterize the rise of a younger generation: *Neue Wilden*.⁴⁴

Curiously, the word 'new' is inflated, as an adjective or prefix, in English or in another language, but it is never used, as it would be common, to designate

⁴⁰ The most important graffiti artists were Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–1988) and Keith Haring (1958–1990), but it is worth also mentioning James Brown (1951), Kenny Scharf (1958) and Donald Joseph White, known as 'DONDI' (1961–1998). An episode of Basquiat's career directly connected to Transavantgarde is analysed in chapter 2, section 2.2.

⁴¹ Amongst appropriation artists: Barbara Kruger (1945), Louise Lawler (1947), Sherrie Levine (1947), Richard Prince (1949), Cindy Sherman (1954), Elaine Sturtevant (1924–2014).

⁴² At least, within the period considered here. The best representative of the so-called Neo-geo was Peter Halley (1953), while two important names of the neo-objectual art were Jeff Koons (1955) and Haim Steinbach (1944).

⁴³ It is worth naming some of the most interesting European artists of the period. In France: Jean-Michel Alberola (1953), Robert Combas (1957), and Gérard Garouste (1946). In England: Roger Ackling, (1947–2014) Eric Bainbridge (1955), Stephen Cox (1946), Tony Cragg (1949), Jeffrey Dennis (1956), Antony Gormley (1950), Anish Kapoor (1954), and Bill Woodrow (1948). In Belgium: Denmark (born Marc Robbroeckx, 1950). In Netherlands: Pieter Mol (1946), Peter Schuyff (1958), and John van't Slot (1949). In Spain: Miquel Barceló (1957) and Jose Maria Sicilia (1954). In Portugal: Juliao Sarmiento (1948). In Switzerland: Martin Disler (1949–1996) and Rolf Winnewisser (1949). In Austria: Siegfried Anzinger (1953) and Thomas Stimm (1948). For some of the artists active in Germany, cf. note 44.

⁴⁴ In Germany, following the lessons of masters like Gerhard Richter (1932) and Sigmar Polke (1941), there was a generation of younger artists composed of Helmut Middendorf (1953), Rainer Fetting (1949) or Jiri Georg Dokoupil (1954), in addition to much older George Baselitz (1938), A. R. Penck (1939), Markus Lüpertz (1941), Jörg Immendorff (1945–2007) and Anselm Kiefer (1945). A special path was followed by Martin Kippenberger (1953–1997).

something novel. The term is “connected to an already existing artistic tendency. The ‘new’ is thus not so new, neither it has to be so.”⁴⁵

1.5 Made in Italy

‘Made in Italy’ is a brand indicating that a product is entirely designed, manufactured and packaged in Italy. Its use started in 1980 and it was specifically conceived in order to mark the uniqueness of Italy in four traditional industries: textile, food, furniture, and automotive.⁴⁶ Italian products had gained a good reputation over time, generally associated with quality, elegance, imaginative design and attention to details. With all its contradictions, and certainly facilitated by the consumeristic milieu, the decade of the 1980s was a period of incredible creativity that promoted the Italian style throughout the world.

The role of Paris as the unchallenged capital of fashion was jeopardized by the rise of an incredible generation of designers operating in Milan, who created a multitude of successful brands.⁴⁷ The international role of Paris was somehow recovered thanks to new blood from Japan.⁴⁸

As far as industrial design is concerned, many valuable designers could be remembered here, but the essential name was Ettore Sottsass (1917–2007) and the group founded by him in 1981, Memphis. The group incarnated postmodernism in industrial design, producing objects characterized by bright colours, asymmetrical shapes, with an eye to the past and no fear for kitsch.

⁴⁵ Translation of the author from: Honnef 1990 Klaus Honnef, *L'arte contemporanea*; Cologne, Taschen, 1990, p. 14.

⁴⁶ Such industries are denoted in Italy as the four A's, from the corresponding Italian words: *Abbigliamento*, *Agroalimentare*, *Arredamento*, *Automobile*.

⁴⁷ With no pretence of being exhaustive, here are some of the names of designers/brands that boomed in the 1980s: Giorgio Armani, Dolce & Gabbana, Fendi, Gianfranco Ferrè, Krizia, Ottavio Missoni, Franco Moschino, Miuccia Prada, and Gianni Versace.

⁴⁸ Namely, the Japanese fashion designers Issey Miyake (1938), Yoshiji Yamamoto (1943) and Rei Kawakubo (1942). After their first show in 1981, *Libération* entitled: “French fashion has found its masters: the Japanese.” For this anecdote and further information, refer to: Premoli 2009 Aldo Premoli, *Moda anni ottanta*, in: *Gli anni 80. Una prospettiva italiana*, ed. by Marco Meneguzzo; Milan, Silvana Editoriale, 2009.

The room divider named *Carlton*, designed in wood and plastic laminate by Sottsass in 1981, is one of the emblems of the 1980s and postmodernism, in general (fig. 9).



Figure 9 *Carlton* room divider, 1981, Ettore Sottsass, Designer; Memphis s.r.l., Manufacturer, Wood, plastic laminate, 194.9 x 189.9 x 40 cm.

2. *Transavantgarde*

Transavantgarde was the lucky name coined by Achille Bonito Oliva in an article for the magazine *Flash Art* in October 1979 to define a group of five Italian artists (fig. 10): Sandro Chia (1946), Francesco Clemente (1952), Enzo Cucchi (1949), Nicola De Maria (1954) and Mimmo, born Domenico, Paladino (1948).⁴⁹



Figure 10 The fabulous five Transavantgarde artists. From left to right: Paladino, Chia, Clemente, Cucchi, De Maria. Basel, 1980.

The name suggested going beyond avant-gardes, with the freedom of going back into the past and forward into the future. Bonito Oliva explained:

⁴⁹ Bonito Oliva 1979 Achille Bonito Oliva, *The Italian Trans-Avantgarde*; Milan, *Flash Art* No.92–93; republished in: *Transavanguardia*, ed. by Ida Gianelli; Milan, Skira, 2002, p. 271–275.

*By definition, the avant-garde has always worked within the cultural framework of an idealistic tradition, tending to configure the development of art as continuous, progressive and linear. The underlying ideology of this mentality is linguistic Darwinism, an evolutionary idea of art with a tradition of linguistic development from the forebears of the historic avant-garde to the very latest fruits of artistic research.*⁵⁰

According to the critic, the artists of the Sixties had “the imperative to innovate”, while the new artists “began to operate at the point when the compulsion to innovate ceased”.⁵¹ Bonito Oliva identified such a moment in the 1973 oil crisis determined by OPEC in response to US aid to Israel during the Yom Kippur War.⁵² This crisis had induced a slowing down in the Economic system and its production cycles, mirrored in an analogous crisis of art development. In a world paralysed by the oil crisis, also the optimistic, progressive quest for a new world pursued by the artistic avant-gardes had to stop. “In actual fact, this is the crisis of the avant-garde’s evolutionary Darwinian thinking.”⁵³

Since the beginning the group appeared artificially composed: “it could have included more, or less, artists, or artists of other nationalities.”⁵⁴ Actually, in the aforementioned article that established the name, Bonito Oliva listed two, further names in addition to the five canonical artists: Marco Bagnoli (1949) and Remo Salvadori (1947). Indeed, other Italian artists exhibited together with the five *transavanguardia* and, thanks to their style, they could have been easily included in the group: Ernesto Tatafiore (1943), Mimmo Germanà (1944–1992), Marco Del Re (1950) and Nino Longobardi (1953). But Bonito Oliva was not inclusive, he rather followed his personal scheme in the choice

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 272.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) had decided to reduce oil production by 5% per month on October 17, 1973, as a consequence of the Yom Kippur War fought by the coalition of Arab states led by Egypt and Syria against Israel from October 6 to 25, 1973. For the identification of this event as a key for the development of *Transavanguardia*, see for instance Bonito Oliva 2002 Achille Bonito Oliva, *Transavanguardia*; Florence, Gruppo Editoriale Giunti, 2002, p. 7.

⁵³ Bonito Oliva 1979 (cf. note 49), p. 272–273.

⁵⁴ Troncy 2005 Eric Troncy, *About Trans-Avantgarde*, in: *Le retour à la peinture. Les inventeurs de la Transavanguardia*; Milan, Skira, 2005, p. 18.

of the artists to be accepted or excluded. Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, intellectual and collector, famous for the projects developed with Joseph Beyus (1921–1986), told her version of the story of the genesis of the group, not without some gossip and sour elements:

Bonito Oliva had very precise ideas, he was a friend of Craxi's, thus he had political endorsement, but he needed a valuable person capable of an efficient organization. Of course, I refused the project, since I should have abandoned not only Beuys, but my idea of art and my own independence. Marco Bagnoli and Remo Salvadori refused the proposal, as well. Since no gallerist felt like joining and risking in such an ambitious project, it was myself indeed, who suggested the name of Emilio Mazzoli, an art dealer from Modena who wanted to open a gallery and become a public figure. [...] He was a big, generous man, a schoolmaster, I guess; he was living in social housing and had a priest and a butcher as his partners for buying artworks. [...] On my suggestion, Bonito Oliva went to Modena, where he met Emilio Mazzoli, who was very willing to cooperate. Francesco Clemente and Sandro Chia were therefore chosen, while Bagnoli and Salvadori were substituted by Mimmo Paladino, Enzo Cucchi and Nicola De Maria, young conceptual artists still little known, to whom they promised a great success and money, what later was achieved.⁵⁵

Even crossing Italian frontiers, there could be other artists, who, having rediscovered the joy of painting, would not have been misfits in Transavantgarde. However, Bonito Oliva wanted to give a national connotation to the movement, as a precise strategy of breaking with Arte Povera. In her fundamental book on Arte Povera, American curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (1957) wrote:

Throughout the twentieth century, revolutionary theory has been internationalist in perspective, fundamentally opposed to the legacies of the nineteenth-century nationalism. By the end of the 1960s a new form of

⁵⁵ Translation of the author from: De Domizio 2013 Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, *Perché. Le sfide di una donna oltre l'arte*; Milan, Mondadori, 2013, p. 27–28. Not surprisingly, Mazzoli replied that this was 'bullshit'. See D'Ercole 2014 (cf. note 37) p. 12–14.

internationalism had developed, founded on the idea that advanced contemporary art was universal and not rooted in any specific local context.

*In 1968 Italian artists were shown in Dusseldorf [...] and artists such as Richard Long and Jan Dibbets exhibited in Italy in the first international group exhibition of this generation of the 1960s [...] in Amalfi. The following year, Celant's book Arte Povera was published in Italian, German and English, and the internationalization of Arte Povera, alongside postminimalism, Land Art, antiform and Conceptual Art, was complete.*⁵⁶

Achille Bonito Oliva used the Latin expression *genius loci*, in order to emphasize the importance of tradition and 'local knowledge'.⁵⁷

*'Local' contrasted with 'international' (as the International Style, the reigning style in modern architecture), when internationality was identified with a homologous value system designed to conceal cultural differences on the pretext of forging a language and a value system which would be universally applicable.*⁵⁸

Bonito Oliva stated: "The hallmark of Arte Povera was its internationalist quest for a utopia of art going beyond national boundaries, thus losing and alienating profound cultural and anthropological roots."⁵⁹ The critic selected artists from very different places in Italy (Naples, Ancona, Florence and Benevento), who were independently working in different cities (Rome, Milan, Turin and Naples). In his intentions, they had to mark their individuality, based on their

⁵⁶ Christov-Bakargiev 1999 Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte Povera*; London, Phaidon, 2005, p. 44. Richard Long (1945) is one of the best known British land artists. Jan Dibbets (1941) is a Dutch conceptual artist.

⁵⁷ In classical Roman religion a *genius loci* was the protective spirit of a place, while in contemporary usage, *genius loci* usually refers to a location's distinctive atmosphere, or a 'spirit of place', rather than necessarily a guardian spirit. This concept affirmed by Bonito Oliva was perfectly in line with Lyotard's thought (see the Introduction to the present text, section 1.3). *Genius loci* was also the title of an exhibition curated by Bonito Oliva held in Acireale, Sicily, at the end of 1980, that moved to Ferrara at the beginning of 1981. Only De Maria was not present, while there were some non-Italian artists, some artists very close to the group like Del Re and Germanà and two artists of the San Lorenzo group (Ceccobelli and Tirelli, see section 5.2). For further information, see the catalogue: Bonito Oliva 1980 Achille Bonito Oliva, *Genius Loci*; Florence, Centro Di, 1980.

⁵⁸ Gianelli 2002 Ida Gianelli, *Foreword*, in: *Transavanguardia*, ed. by Ida Gianelli; Milan, Skira, 2002, p. 13.

⁵⁹ Bonito Oliva 1979 (cf. note 49), p. 273.

own experience and their distinctive origins; on the other hand, the fact that these artists were already pursuing such separate careers was another sign of the artificiality and arbitrariness of the group, as some art historians pointed out.⁶⁰ The concept of *genius loci* was linked to another value professed by Bonito Oliva: what he called 'cultural nomadism'. In fact, as the name Transavanguardia suggested, its members had not only to pass through art history with no privileged direction or pre-established hierarchy, but they also had to eclectically look at local tradition, at minor, less-known artists, out of the circles of great avant-gardes.

Bonito Oliva moved other accusations against Arte Povera that "pursued a repressive, masochistic line" and pushed artistic creativity towards "impersonality, reflecting the political climate of the Sixties, preaching depersonalisation in the name of the supremacy of the political".⁶¹

Speaking of politics, the political nature of Arte Povera was more than explicit in the title of the 1967 founding essay by Germano Celant (1940), *Arte Povera: Notes for a Guerrilla War*, where the critic conceived it "as an art that rejected consumer society and saw the artist not as a 'producer' but as an individual dedicated to 'the free self-projection of human activity'".⁶²

However, even if communist ideology was the background of Arte Povera and most of the Italian intellectuals belonged to the Italian Communist Party, it should be remembered that in 1947 its leader Palmiro Togliatti (1893–1964) had hard condemned abstract art and avant-gardes.⁶³ Thus, in post-war Italy, figurative art was either the style of conservatives or the style of communists, following the party's directions. So, when Bonito Oliva created Transavanguardia also as a means for the rising Socialist Party to break the communist cultural hegemony, he was paradoxically offering a kind of art that

⁶⁰ See, for instance, Troncy 2005 (cf. note 54), p. 18.

⁶¹ Bonito Oliva 1979 (cf. note 49), p. 271 and p. 273, respectively.

⁶² Christov-Bakargiev 1999 (cf. note 56), p. 18. The original essay by Celant is partially republished therein, p. 194–196.

Actually, Mario Merz (1925–2003) was probably the more politically direct artist of Arte Povera, having included quotations of Lenin's and Vietcong General Giap's statements in his works.

⁶³ Lined-up with Stalin's ideas on art, Togliatti promoted realism, represented by artists like Renato Guttuso (1911–1987).

many members of the Communist Party actually preferred. In fact, the main characteristic of the movement was a return to painting and, with the partial exception of De Maria, to a figurative art. A similar phenomenon was happening in other countries, where it assumed different names.

There existed a common *Zeitgeist*, a common “sense of liberation from a period of austerity and excessive rigor” that resulted in the creation of Neo-expressionist or Neo-Fauves movements.⁶⁴ If German artists could draw on an important expressionistic tradition, such a tradition was almost absent in Italy⁶⁵. The most significant expressionistic episode in Italy was developed by the so-called Roman School, also known as ‘Scuola di Via Cavour’. In 1927, artists Antonietta Raphaël (1895–1975) and Mario Mafai (1902–1965) moved to No. 325 of Roman street *via Cavour* and established their studio, which soon became a meeting point for intellectuals and young artists.

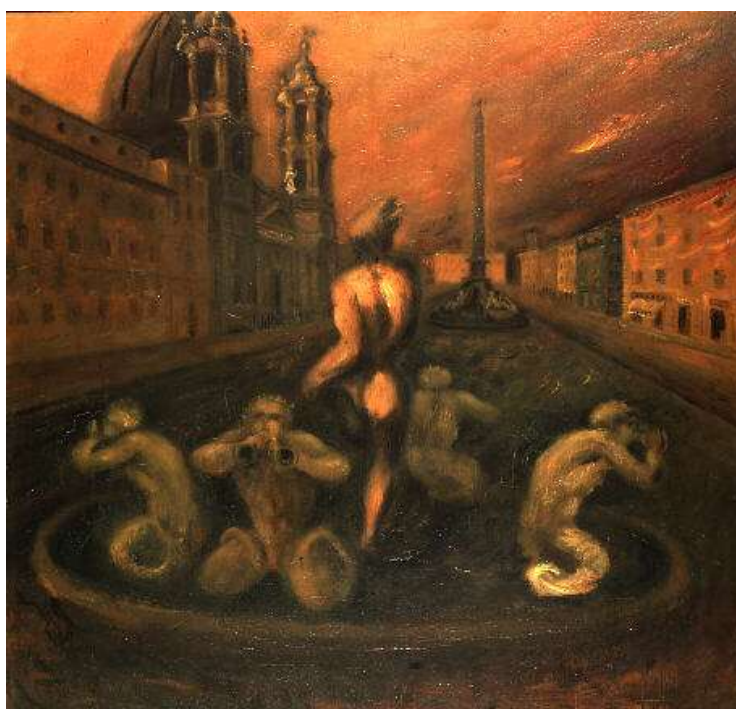


Figure 11 Scipione, *Piazza Navona*, 1930, Oil on board, 80 x 82 cm, Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna.

⁶⁴ Christov-Bakargiev 2002 Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *The Italian Transavantgarde: a Rereading*, in: *Transavanguardia*, ed. by Ida Gianelli; Milan, Skira, 2002, p. 83.

⁶⁵ In 1990 an exhibition held in Turin and curated by Renato Barilli and Alessandra Borgogelli investigated the existence of an “Italian expressionism”; not a real group, but some artists adopting expressionistic solutions: Umberto Moggioli (1886–1919), Tullio Garbari (1892–1931), Gino Rossi (1884–1947), Arturo Martini (1889–1947), Adolfo Wildt (1868–1931), and others.

Together with the two mentioned artists, the other major artist of the movement was Gino Bonichi (1904–1933), known as Scipione. They looked at European expressionism, but also at Roman Baroque, as a reaction to Fascist Neo-classicism (fig. 11). Their style was wild and violently expressive, characterized by warm ochre, red and maroon hues (fig. 12).



Figure 12 Scipione, *Apocalisse (Apocalypse)*, 1930, Oil on board, 65 x 78 cm, Turin, Galleria d'Arte Moderna.

Rome became the main centre for Transavanguardia and the Roman School seemed a perfect, natural source of inspiration for its members, being local, not so well-known out of Italy, and, at the same time, so well-tuned with the spirit of the time; it was in fact adopted as a reference, especially by Cucchi. In a sort of a paradox, Transavantgarde, which was accused of repurposing a conservative *return to order* in the 1980s, looked at the Roman School, which was born as a reaction against the 'original' return to order that took place in the 1920s. Another Roman reference for the Transavantgarde artists was

Mario Schifano (1934–1998). The most talented painter of his generation, Schifano had been the protagonist of the Italian Pop Art in Rome in the 1960s. He was already a myth, not only for his talent, but also for his lifestyle and the excesses with girls, alcohol and heroin. Schifano, who constantly employed painting, certainly anticipated Transavantgarde and his paintings of the 1980s, full of joy, pleasure and colour, made him almost an additional, honorary member of the group. He was a dear friend to Bonito Oliva, so that each indubitably exerted reciprocal influence on the other. The highest moment of this fellowship was the event organized in Florence in 1985: Schifano painted a 40 square meter canvas in Piazza dell'Annunciata, live and in front of 5,000 people as in a rock concert, with Bonito Oliva acting as a commentator. The result of the performance was *Chimera*, an astonishing, monumental work; one of the best trans-avantgarde paintings produced out of Transavantgarde (fig. 13).



Figure 13 Mario Schifano, *Chimera*, 1985, Acrylic on canvas, ca. 100 x 400 cm, Rome, Macro.

Another important point of connection was Schifano's gallerist, Emilio Mazzoli, who worked together with Bonito Oliva and became the reference gallerist of Transavantgarde.

The first important show for the group was indeed *Arte Cifra* (Ciphered art), at Paul Maenz Gallery in Cologne in 1979, where works by Chia, Clemente, De Maria and Paladino, but also by Longobardi and Tatafiore were exhibited. The same year, the five members of the group were the protagonists of *Opere fatte ad arte* (Artfully done works) in Acireale, Sicily, and *Le stanze* (The rooms), in Genazzano in nearby Rome, both curated by Bonito Oliva. 1980 was a crucial year, with many international exhibitions and the consecration of the five artists in the section of the Venice Biennale called *Aperto 80*, co-curated by Bonito Oliva and Harald Szeemann (1933–2005), where also Germanà and Tatafiore were invited. After further important shows held in prestigious locations and galleries in 1981, 1982 was the most intense year as far as exhibitions of the group were concerned. Norman Rosenthal (1944) and Christos Joachimides (1932) curated *Zeitgeist* in Berlin, where only De Maria was absent, and Rudi Fuchs (1942) invited the whole group to *Documenta 7*.

Thanks also to the indomitable spirit of Bonito Oliva, who was very active in promoting the movement with a true talent for marketing, “during this period, critics, collectors and museum curators embraced the Transavanguardia as part of the new postmodern movement in painting.”⁶⁶

In the following sections, the five artists of the group will be more closely analysed; in fact, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev commented:

There have been few general essays written about the Transavanguardia as a movement. One reason for this is that the work of these artists tends to resist general analysis, by remaining in the spheres of regression, sexuality, fantasy and simplicity. It is an art that values anti-intellectualism, and locates itself in the arena of poetry rather than of coherent discourse. However, it is precisely

⁶⁶ Christov-Bakargiev 2002 (cf. note 64), p. 79.

*this characteristic which allows us to view it in relation to earlier modernist artistic practices that have also pursued anti-intellectualism.*⁶⁷

2.1 Sandro Chia

Sandro Chia, after his studies at the Academy in Florence, had his first solo show at La Salita Gallery in Rome in 1971, still within the conceptual art domain. Around 1978, Chia started moving towards painting and met Enzo Cucchi, with whom he collaborated in a series of works. They exhibited together at Emilio Mazzoli's Gallery in Modena in the show *Tre o Quattro artisti secchi* (Three or four Artists-Straight), curated by Achille Bonito Oliva. Soon afterwards, Chia found his manner, made of a broad range of styles. Bonito Oliva saw in Chia

*[...] the pleasure of painting finally withdrawn from the tyranny of novelty, and thus capable of using various 'manners' to achieve the image. Reference are innumerable, none are excluded: from Chagall to Picasso, to Cézanne, to De Chirico, from Carrà the Futurist to Carrà the metaphysical painter and the twentieth-century painter, to Picabia.*⁶⁸

Many other names could be added to the ones listed by the critic. Chia's *genius loci* was evident in some reminiscence of the Florentine school of mannerist painters, namely Rosso Fiorentino (1494–1540) and Pontormo (1494–1557). However, the main reference for Chia was the art produced in Italy in the 1930s; Chia was mainly influenced by Ottone Rosai (1895–1957), a painter very famous and seminal in Florence in that period (fig. 14). For sure, he looked at the Roman school, already indicated as a reference for the whole Transavantgarde group, at some Lombard painters, such as Aligi Sassu (1912–2000), but he was also aware of works by minor artists, like, for instance, Riccardo Francalancia (1886–1965).

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 88.

⁶⁸ Bonito Oliva 2002 Achille Bonito Oliva, *Transavanguardia: bel canto ahead, torture behind*, in: *Transavanguardia*, ed. by Ida Gianelli; Milan, Skira, 2002, p. 42.



Figure 14 Juxtaposition of:

Ottone Rosai, *Pioggia (Rain)*, Undated, Oil on canvas, 59.9 x 45.4 cm, Genoa, Auction 121, Cambi Aste (left).

Sandro Chia, *Fumatore con guanto giallo (Smoker with Yellow Glove)*, 1980, Oil on canvas, 150 x 130 cm, Zurich, Bruno Bischofberger Collection (right).

His works were well described by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev:

Chia's imagery is often transgressive: even when there is an absence of action, as in the many smokers portrayed by the artist, there is hidden action – sometimes even depicted as 'farting' [...]. Chia's subjects are anti-heroes, the idiots of a bucolic primitivism. They suggest metaphysical stupor and suspension. They jump or float in a universe of Suprematist memory or of Chagallian innocence. [...] These figures are always doing something – kicking, stabbing, dreaming, fighting. There is much brushwork in Chia's large and dense paintings that represent bizarre events in mysterious environments which connect back to early Expressionism and Italian Metafisica. [...] The sense of monumentality in his art contrasts with the subject-matter, often

*anything but monumental in an intentional contradiction – suggesting painting's proximity to, and also absolute distance from, life.*⁶⁹

Within the group, Chia's style was, together with Cucchi's, the most brutal and expressionistic. Chia explored the territories of Bad Painting (fig. 15).⁷⁰



Figure 15 Sandro Chia, *Cane italiano (Italian Dog)*, 1979, Oil on canvas, 161.5 x 161.5 cm, Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum.

If it were not for his outstanding *curriculum studiorum*, Chia's disproportionate figures and wrong perspectives could be easily misinterpreted as the work of

⁶⁹ Christov-Bakargiev 2002 (cf. note 64), p. 81–82.

⁷⁰ As per the definition given by Marcia Tucker in 1978. See the Introduction to the present work, section 1.4.

an incompetent painter. Actually, he used a lot of irony, a typical postmodern tool employed to avoid mere imitation of the past (fig. 16).⁷¹



Figure 16 Sandro Chia, *Sinfonia incompiuta* (*Unfinished Symphony*), 1980, Oil on canvas, 200 x 148 cm, Turin, Museo Castello di Rivoli.

⁷¹ For a writer, irony can be achieved using words to express something different from and often opposite to their literal meaning. For a painter is not that easy; irony can be achieved by applying a traditional style to an unusual context. The matter is briefly discussed in Honnef 1990 (cf. note 45), p. 103–104.

The anti-heroes and the idiots described by Christov-Bakargiev were then represented by Chia in ways traditionally reserved to heroes and important men (fig. 17).



Figure 17 Sandro Chia, *Portatore d'acqua (Water Bearer)*, 1981, Oil and pastel on canvas, 206 x 107 cm, London, Tate Gallery.

After his first exhibition in New York in 1980 at the Sperone Westwater Fischer Gallery, Chia was invited to all the most important international exhibitions: the Royal Academy in London in 1981, the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1982, the Stedelijk Museum and the Tate Gallery in London in 1983. In 1984 Chia moved to New York, where a selection of prints was shown in The Mezzanine Gallery at the Metropolitan Museum. In 1985 he decorated a room in the Equitable Center in New York, choosing the Palio in Siena as his subject. The triumphant decade ended with the participation at the Venice Biennale in 1988 and a solo show at the Museum Moderner Kunst in Vienna in 1989.

2.2 Francesco Clemente

Francesco Clemente was the most complex artist amongst the five members of Transavantgarde. Born in Naples, he moved to Rome in 1970 and soon became, using Bonito Oliva's definition, "a nomad by vocation".⁷² In fact, in 1973 he made his first trip to India, where for many years he has spent part of the year, in Madras. After his first exhibition in New York in 1980, Clemente established his studio there. He has been a resident in New York for many years, with regular stints in New Mexico. Such a nomadic nature was reflected in his art, characterized by "an admirable short-circuit between East and West."⁷³

In the early 1970s Clemente had met two influential fellow artists: Alighiero Boetti and Luigi Ontani. Critic Mario Codognato noted:

Interaction with two such crucial figures as Alighiero Boetti and Luigi Ontani radically enlarged the limits of the field in which to interpret art and to assess the potential of its practice, also promoting, among other things, an enormous freedom in the utilization of any and all means and materials, with nothing precluded on ideological grounds. [...] Both created works in collaboration with

⁷² Bonito Oliva 2002 (cf. note 68), p. 44.

⁷³ Ibid.

*artisans, conjoining their own ideas and visions with the technical expertise and unpredictable sensibilities of other individuals.*⁷⁴

Following their example, in the course of the years Clemente was helped by experts of the fresco in Italy and by professional miniaturists in India.



Figure 18 Francesco Clemente, *Il cerchio di Milarepa* (*Milarepa's Circle*), 1982, Oil on canvas, 200 x 250 cm, Turin, Museo Castello di Rivoli.

Clemente himself declared: “Alighiero taught me to reason (in terms of painting) even though he did not paint. He thought the game played before anything was physically produced was important. I learned from Ontani to impersonate a painter. Thanks to him I learned that ‘the painter’ is a mask.”⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Codognato 2002 Mario Codognato, *Francesco Clemente in Naples*; Naples, Electa Napoli, 2002, p. 14.

⁷⁵ Quoted in Bonito Oliva 2002 (cf. note 68), p. 44.



Figure 19 Francesco Clemente, *Con i sentimenti insegna alle emozioni* (*With Feelings He Teaches Emotions*), 1980, Fresco, 300 x 600 cm, Zurich, Bruno Bischofberger Collection.

However, the major influence these masters had on him was related to the favourite themes of their own works: the representation of the self, the theme of the double and the fascination for the Orient. These became the key motifs in Clemente's art.

In 1977 Clemente joined the Theosophical Society in Madras. Theosophy could be a useful tool to approach his art: it investigated the mysteries of nature and the bonds that united the universe, humanity, and the divine, in order to discover a coherent description of the purpose and origin of the cosmos (fig. 18). To find connections with the universe and the divine, the fundamental starting point was the self, explored from every point of view and in relationship with the external world. Self-portrait and body in general were the main subjects of Clemente's works (fig. 19).

*Francesco Clemente paints a multiplied self, a shifting self, a suspended self, often in dreamlike states. The subjectivity he suggests is obsessively present, yet weak and unauthoritative. In some ways, it recalls Egon Schiele's elongated and sinuous figures. It has many orifices and gaps, it enters into and slips out of bodies, it goes beyond distinctions of gender.*⁷⁶

In describing Clemente's work, also Bonito Oliva mentioned Egon Schiele (1890–1918).⁷⁷ Although Clemente was such an eclectic artist, it would be difficult to identify other names recalled by his works, even if Van Gogh (1853–1890) is always a reference for self-portraits (fig. 20).

Clemente used many techniques indiscriminately: photography, painting, drawing, fresco and artist's books. The making of books was an important part of his activity: in 1983 Clemente collaborated with poets Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997), Harry Mathews (1930) and John Wieners (1934–2002) in the production of handmade books; in 1986 he founded his own publishing house, Hanuman Books.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Christov-Bakargiev 2002 (cf. note 64), p. 81.

⁷⁷ See, for instance, Bonito Oliva 2002 (cf. note 68), p. 45.

⁷⁸ For further information, visit <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/>, last access 12.04.15.



Figure 20 Francesco Clemente, *Self-portrait with a Hole in the Head*, 1981, Oil on canvas, 51 x 76 cm, Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum.

In 1984 Clemente produced a series of works in collaboration with Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat, within a project promoted by their Swiss gallerist Bruno Bischofberger (fig. 21). The genesis of these collaborations was told by Bischofberger himself:

A project had developed in my mind to ask Andy Warhol, whose main dealer I had become in 1968, whether he would make some works together with one or two younger artists that I represented. [...] In the autumn of 1982 I brought Jean-Michel to Andy Warhol in the Factory and this is how they really got to know each other. [...] Basquiat and I soon started to speak of Francesco Clemente as the third artist for the collaborations project and we decided together to invite him to join in, after having pondered Julian Schnabel as an alternative. [...] Jean-Michel knew and respected Clemente, whose studio was only two blocks away from Jean-Michel's. [...] To get the most spontaneous work into the collaborations I suggested to Basquiat that every artist should, without conferring with the others about iconography, style, size, technique, etc., independently start the paintings, of course in the knowledge that two further artists would be working on the same canvas, and that enough mental and physical space should be left to accommodate them. I further suggested to him that each artist send one half of the started collaborations to each of

*the other artists and the works then be passed on to the remaining artist whose work was still missing. [...] Between the 15. September and 13. October 1984 I showed the group of fifteen works at my Zurich gallery in an exhibition entitled Collaborations – Basquiat Clemente Warhol [...].*⁷⁹



Figure 21 Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Bruno Bischofberger and Francesco Clemente, New York, 1984.

Thus, such collaborations were triggered by an art dealer, rather than by an artistic impulse; the outcome was very interesting, due to the level of the artists involved, but very difficult to judge (fig. 22 and fig. 23). Critic Marc Francis commented:

For each of the three artists, collaborating was to forfeit nominal control of the finished (or unfinished) product. In fact, it is impossible to see these paintings – and some drawings – as definitely resolved and completed works of art. That

⁷⁹ Bischofberger 1996 Bruno Bischofberger, *Collaborations. Reflections on and Experiences with Basquiat, Clemente and Warhol*, in: *Collaborations. Warhol. Basquiat. Clemente*, ed. by Tilman Osterwold; Ostfildern-Ruit, Cantz Verlag, 1996, p. 39–43.

is not to say that the artists did not consciously hand them over the world outside their studios, but that no formal resolution is really possible when new elements were continually being added or obliterated by the following collaborator.⁸⁰



Figure 22 Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Francesco Clemente, *Alba's Breakfast*, 1984, Acrylic on canvas, 118 x 152 cm, Private collection.

Curator Zdenek Felix (1938) epitomized well:

All three of the involved artists used the encounter of the pictorial ideas of the other to find, in this competitive environment, a quick-witted answer to the challenge of a foreign style and method. None of the artists has in any way

⁸⁰ Francis 1996 Marc Francis, *From A to B to C and back again. Collaborations between Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Francesco Clemente*, in: *Collaborations. Warhol. Basquiat. Clemente*, ed. by Tilman Osterwold; Ostfildern-Ruit, Cantz Verlag, 1996, p. 72.

adapted himself to the others; on the contrary, in many of the paintings there are tense dialogues, meetings of different worlds. Warhol's impersonal, mechanical painting machine meets the spontaneous letters and Graffiti openness of Basquiat and the sensuous, bodily plasticity of Francesco Clemente, a meeting of three very different mentalities: the American, the Caribbean, the Italian.⁸¹



Figure 23 Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Francesco Clemente, *Cilindrone*, 1985, Oil, pastel, marker, acrylic and silk-screen on canvas, 122 x 168 cm, Private collection.

Clemente's artistic career started very early; with his first solo show in Rome in 1970, and developed very successfully with countless exhibitions in many of the most important international venues. After the Venice Biennale in 1988, the new decade began with a retrospective devoted to his work at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, entitled *Three Worlds*, which later travelled to the

⁸¹ Felix 1996 Zdenek Felix, *Collaborations as Exchange and Method*, in: *Collaborations. Warhol. Basquiat. Clemente*, ed. by Tilman Osterwold; Ostfildern-Ruit, Cantz Verlag, 1996, p. 65–66.

Royal Academy in London. The titled alluded to Italy, India and New York, the worlds loved and inhabited by Clemente.



Figure 24 Osvaldo Licini, *Angelo ribelle su sfondo rosso (Rebel Angel on a Red Background)*, 1946, Oil on canvas, 72.5 x 91.5 cm, Ascoli, Museo Osvaldo Licini.

2.3 Enzo Cucchi

Enzo Cucchi was a self-taught painter, who was born in the Marche and started, like Bonito Oliva, as a poet. About the importance of his origins, Professor Ulrich Schneider (1950) wrote:

Enzo Cucchi is a man of the Marche. His imaginary worlds draw their power from this land. Its multiform ranges of hills, enchanting as the bosoms of lovely mothers, over which hover the dark and even aggressive rainclouds that transfer the waters of the Mediterranean to the soil, are fundamental, almost humanized elements of Cucchi's private iconography. Also belonging to his

personalized world of painted objects are the long farmhouses typical of the region, dormant, as if in drugged slumber. And often there appears a face, probably the artist's own, full of joy and pain, and its long, slender body, exposed to an infinitude of menace. Those who have travelled the Marches know the impressions, the scents and the stillness of Enzo Cucchi's paintings.⁸²



Figure 25 Juxtaposition of:

Scipione, *Il ponte degli angeli*, 1930, Oil on board, 82 x 100 cm, Private collection (left).

Enzo Cucchi, *Le case vanno in discesa* (*The Houses are Going Downhill*), 1983, Oil on canvas, 117 x 156 cm, Chicago, exhibition at The Renaissance Society (right).

The importance of the *genius loci* was here confirmed, since Cucchi's principal reference was another painter from the Marches: Osvaldo Licini (1894–1958). Probably not so well-known outside of Italy nowadays, Licini was one of the major Italian artists of the century. In the 1930s he embraced abstract painting in his original way, full of poetry, powerful lyricism and imagination, finding a fascinating combination of expressionistic solutions and pre-informal techniques (fig. 24).

As already noted, Chia was akin to the Roman School, especially Scipione (fig. 25). In some works, the influence of some figurative works by Kazimir Severinovič Malevič (1879–1935) was evident (fig. 26). For Cucchi's early career as a painter, the collaboration with Chia was fundamental. The two

⁸² Schneider 1997 Ulrich Schneider, *Enzo Cucchi, Man of the Marches. Enzo Cucchi, Man of the Antiquity*, in: *Città d'Ancona. Enzo Cucchi*, ed. by Michele Polverari; Milan, Electa, 1997, p. 28.

artists shared a brutal style. Parenthetically, Cucchi had a much shriller palette than Chia.



Figure 26 Juxtaposition of:

Kazimir Malevich, *Bather*, 1911, Gouache on paper, 105 x 69 cm, Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum (left).

Enzo Cucchi, *Viaggio eroico (Heroic Voyage)*, 1980, Oil on canvas, 260 x 110 cm, Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum (right).

Cucchi's subjects were unpredictable; Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev wrote:

Enzo Cucchi is one of the most straightforward and instinctive painters – he paints the pictures that come to his mind and that move him, no matter how absurd and nonsensical they may seem to others. He invents his own iconography, at once simple and visionary, a universe where people are

*dwarfed in the landscape or, conversely, where they become overbearing giants in their surroundings.*⁸³



Figure 27 Enzo Cucchi, *Il sospiro di un'onda* (*The Sigh of a wave*), 1983, Oil on canvas, 300 x 400 cm, Zurich, Bruno Bischofberger Collection.

There were some recurrent, apocalyptic elements in his painting, taken from the catholic iconography and showing a fascination with martyrdom and *memento mori*: skulls and drops of blood. Because of the gloomy atmosphere of this kind of paintings, Cucchi was likened to Kiefer (fig. 27).⁸⁴

Cucchi had a career similar to Chia's. Thanks to the relationship with gallerists Emilio Mazzoli in Modena and Bruno Bischofberger in Zurich, after the Venice Biennale in 1980, Cucchi began exhibiting in all the most important international shows. In 1981 he had an exhibition at Sperone Westwater Fischer Gallery in New York and at the Bruno Bischofberger Gallery in Zurich.

⁸³ Christov-Bakargiev 2002 (cf. note 64), p. 82.

⁸⁴ Honnef 1990 (cf. note 45), p. 93.



Figure 28 Enzo Cucchi, *Sculpture for Brüglinger Botanical Garden*, 1984, Basel.

In the following year, he presented some drawings at the Kunsthhaus in Zurich and at the Groninger Museum. With Chia and other Italian artists, Cucchi was invited to participate in *Italian Art Now: An American Perspective* at the Solomon Guggenheim in New York in 1982. In 1983 he held an exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and at the Kunsthalle in Basel, then he took part in a show at the Kunsthhaus in Zurich and in another one at the Tate Gallery in London. In 1984 Cucchi installed one of his sculptures in the Brüglinger Botanical Garden in Basel (fig. 28). Like in a crescendo, he had a great chance to become the hippest artist with an important show in 1986 at the Solomon Guggenheim in New York. Unanimously, it was a flop. Cucchi purposely disappointed expectations, presenting two sculptures on the floor and little drawings on a wall, leaving most of the available space empty. Cucchi probably wanted to preserve his own freedom and refused to play the role of 'the Italian artist' that the American market was expecting from him. Of course, this episode changed the career of the artist. In 1986, Cucchi participated in a

roundtable with Beyus, Kiefer and Kounellis, organized by the international magazine *Parkett*.⁸⁵ According to Mazzoli, it was Cucchi who had strategically organized the event, in order to exit Transavantgarde and approach Arte Povera.⁸⁶ Paladino was of the same opinion and underlined how Cucchi seemed to be under the protection of Germano Celant and Ida Gianelli.⁸⁷ It was quite ironic, thinking of what Bonito Oliva had written in 1979 on Arte Povera.



Figure 29 Nicola De Maria, *Testa dell'artista cosmico a Torino (Head of the Cosmic Artist in Turin)*, 1984-85, Mixed media on canvas, 240 x 380 cm, Turin, Museo Castello di Rivoli.

⁸⁵ The idea for the logo of *Parkett* was indeed given by Cucchi, as reported by editor and art critic Jacqueline Burckhardt in D'Ercole 2014 (cf. note 55), p. 116–119.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 23. In the same book, at p. 121, Jacqueline Burckhardt implicitly confirms this idea.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 111.

2.4 Nicola De Maria

Nicola De Maria was the odd man out among all those figurative, neo-expressionistic artists. Indeed, his art was so different that it would be difficult to explain his inclusion within the group on the basis of theoretical arguments. Bonito Oliva was probably moved by commercial interests, because of the galleries where De Maria was exhibiting. Moreover, the presence of an essentially non-figurative artist in the group could have fulfilled the need to leave a door open, just in case figuration would not have worked.

As a consequence of his eccentric position, De Maria was not present in some of the important exhibitions of the group.

De Maria was born in a town near Benevento, in Southern Italy, then he moved to Turin. In his case, also because of such a biography, it would be difficult to identify a specific *genius loci*; in fact, Bonito Oliva vaguely stated that De Maria “interprets the Italian *genius loci* well [...]”.⁸⁸ It could be argued that his palette had a lot of Southern Italy and the Mediterranean spirit (fig. 29).

Amongst all the Transavantgarde artists De Maria was “the most architecturally oriented, and the least oriented towards the representation of the human body.”⁸⁹ He often created environments, with large wall-paintings occupying all the walls and ceiling of rooms (fig. 30). Even when confronted with smaller canvases, De Maria often painted them on all sides including back and front “as if the small canvases encouraged manipulation and embrace.”⁹⁰

His typical works were structured as abstract, usually monochromatic backgrounds, where different elements, resembling flowers, stars or mysterious alphabets, emerged in their bright hues and were repeated in patterns. Because of such patterns, De Maria’s works were very close to a seminal American movement born in 1970: Pattern and Decoration.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Bonito Oliva 2011 Achille Bonito Oliva, *Dome Painting: Nicola De Maria*, in: *Nicola De Maria*, ed. by Achille Bonito Oliva and Marco Bazzini; Milan, Prearo Editore, 2011, p. 17.

⁸⁹ Christov-Bakargiev 2002 (cf. note 64), p. 80.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ See the Introduction to the present work, section 1.4.



Figure 30 Nicola De Maria, *Cinque o sei lance spezzate a favore del coraggio e della virtù (Five or Six Lances Broken on Behalf of Courage and Virtue)*, 1982-1985, Water-based colours and pastels on wall, dimensions determined by the space, Turin, Museo Castello di Rivoli.

Definitely, Henri Matisse (1869–1954) was the strongest influence for both De Maria and the P&D group; the French genius had indeed embraced the idea of an art of ease, comfort, and delight. However, Paul Klee (1879–1940) was probably De Maria's closest reference (fig. 31); some bold critics likened some of his works to other calligraphic artists, such as Cy Twombly (1928–2011) and Joan Mirò (1893–1983).

Referring to De Maria, Bonito Oliva used the expression 'Dome Painting'.⁹² Some works of his, sort of *camerae pictae* with patterns of stars coming out from a deep blue, were of course mindful of the Scrovegni Chapel (fig. 32).⁹³

⁹² Bonito Oliva 2011 (cf. note 88), p. 17–18.

⁹³ The church in Padua contains a fresco cycle, which is a masterwork by Giotto (1266/7–1337), who completed it around 1305.



Figure 31 Nicola De Maria, *Regno dei fiori (Kingdom of Flowers)*, 1985, Acrylic on canvas, 200 x 275 cm, New York, Christie's.

De Maria had a brilliant career, inaugurated in 1975 at the Lucio Amelio Gallery. In 1977, De Maria was invited, as the youngest artist in the show, to the Tenth Paris Biennale at the Palais de Tokyo, where a whole room was devoted to his work. After the Venice Biennale, in 1981 he joined Clemente and Paladino in a group exhibition at the Lisson Gallery in London.



Figure 32 Nicola De Maria, *Camera di San Francesco (Saint Francis' room)*, 1982, Mixed media on wall and suitcase, spatial dimensions, Santomato di Pistoia, Collection Gori.

2.5 Mimmo Paladino

Mimmo Paladino started in 1968 as a conceptual artist, employing mainly photographs. He decided to adopt painting around 1977, somehow combining the figurative and the abstract. The work that marked this return to painting had a telling and programmatic title: *Silenzioso, mi ritiro a dipingere un quadro* (Silently, I Withdraw to Paint a Canvas – fig. 33).

Recalling the pleasure and flatness of Matisse, but influenced, as Chia, by Osvaldo Licini, Paladino invented symbols and icons that suggested an origin from past civilizations. Animals, such as horses and dogs, human forms, hybrid icons, both human and animal, recurred in his works (fig. 34). Curator Danilo Eccher (1953) examined these elements closely:



Figure 33 Mimmo Paladino, *Silenzioso, mi ritiro a dipingere* (Silently, I Withdraw to Paint a Canvas), 1977, Oil on canvas, 70 x 50 cm, Actual location not specified.

The Icons are ageless: they appear at the beginning of his work and periodically reappear throughout his artistic career. The Icons do not have a corpus – you cannot group them serially or thematically [...]. The Icons have no fixed address: they take over space with their presence, they soak up the

*memories of a place, now noble and sophisticated, now rough and primitive, to present a fresh image, an unfamiliar face. [...] The flat frontal image in the Icons also represents a metaphysical 'timbre', which confers that peculiar aura of religious detachment upon the figure that makes it effectively holy.*⁹⁴



Figure 34 Mimmo Paladino, *Senza titolo (Untitled)*, 1982, Oil on canvas, 200 x 300 cm, Berlin, Nationalgalerie.

However, Paladino was very sceptical about critics' interpretations to his art. Art historian Margarethe Jochimsen reported:

Paladino remarks that some commentators like to indulge in philosophical theories to explain his thinking and working, whereas he himself is inclined to flee from such reflections. Titles are of little relevance and ideologies are meaningless to him. His domain are high spirits and irony; "Do What You Like", is his slogan. Having profoundly studied the art of the past, he now wants to

⁹⁴ Eccher 2001 Danilo Eccher, *The Secret of Mimmo Paladino's Icons*, in: *Paladino*; Milan, Charta Edizioni, 2001, p. 49.

go his own way, free from traditional limitations, simply following his impulses.⁹⁵

In Paladino's primitive iconography, having similarities with the Romanesque and Gothic style, Bonito Oliva saw the legacy of the Lombard traces remaining in his birthplace, Benevento, in so corroborating the important concept of *genius loci* (fig. 35).⁹⁶



Figure 35 Benevento, Santa Sofia, detail of a capital.

Paladino's career was not as successful as that of some other colleagues of the group, the so-called 'Three C's' (from the initial of Chia, Clemente, Cucchi). He held his first solo show at Enzo Cannaviello's Studio in 1968, presenting, as already pointed out, conceptual works. In 1977, he moved to Milan and in 1978 he started exhibiting out of Italy, in Cologne and Munich. After *Aperto 80*, he was invited to many other exhibition in important museums and galleries. His first important retrospective, showing works from 1977 to 1985, was held in 1985 at the Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus in Munich. Paladino had a large exhibition room at his disposal at the 1988 Venice Biennale.

⁹⁵ Jochimsen 1980 Margarethe Jochimsen, *Diving Into Metaphysics*; Bonn, Margarethe Jochimsen; republished in: *Transavanguardia*, ed. by Ida Gianelli; Milan, Skira, 2002, p. 287.

⁹⁶ See, for instance Bonito Oliva 2002 (cf. note 68), p. 51.

3. Nuovi-nuovi

The antagonist group of Transavantgarde was composed of artists selected by critic Renato Barilli, who chose for them the collective name of Nuovi-nuovi. At the time Barilli was professor at DAMS, where Umberto Eco was one of the leading professors.⁹⁷ The presence of DAMS was of paramount importance in making Bologna a hip place for art, very attractive for young students and a vital city for discussing and developing new ideas. Therefore, Bologna became one of the centres for contemporary art in Italy, together with the traditional cities that had characterized the previous decades: Turin, Milan and Rome.⁹⁸

The basic reason for founding this group was to provide a home for valid artists who had been unduly excluded from Transavantgarde. As already discussed, only five artists had been admitted in the canon defined by Achille Bonito Oliva. According to Renato Barilli, this was unacceptable.⁹⁹ Bonito Oliva established a *numerus clausus*, like the policy to limit the number of students who may study at a university, not on the basis of some academic theory, but moved only by mercantile considerations. As Barilli put it: “The value of a product is inversely proportional to the quantity of similar products on the market”.¹⁰⁰

Renato Barilli considered it legitimate that gallerists and dealers focused on a selected subset of artists by concentrating promotional efforts on them, but

There is one category that cannot be forgiven for such attitudes, [...] that of art critics and historians, who cannot embrace such a cynical and utilitarian mentality, because if they do so they have violated the ethics of their

⁹⁷ Cf. note 8. Umberto Eco (1932) is a semiotician, essayist, philosopher, literary critic, and novelist. He is best known for his groundbreaking 1980 historical mystery novel *The Name of the Rose*. However, he contributed a lot to the artistic debate with two seminal essays, *Opera aperta* (The Open Work, 1962) and *Apocalittici e integrati* (1964), partially translated into English with the title *Apocalypse Postponed*.

⁹⁸ Furthermore, Bologna was the place where a revolution in comics took place, thanks to two groups of cartoonist, *Frigidaire* and *Valvoline*, with many connections with DAMS.

⁹⁹ Barilli repeated this concept in many occasions. See, for instance, Barilli 2006 Renato Barilli, *Prima e dopo il 2000. La ricerca artistica 1970-2005*; Milan, Feltrinelli, 2009, p. 55.

¹⁰⁰ Barilli 2009 Renato Barilli, *For a correct reading of history*, in: *Siamo sempre Nuovi-nuovi*, ed. by Renato Barilli and Roberto Daolio; Florence, SpazioTempo, 2009, p. 31.

*profession. No regulations exist regarding the numbers of persons that can be honestly included in a phenomenon. [...] We need to open the big dossier of the phenomena that appear on the scene, including all those who legitimately belong to their ranks, all the cases that show clear signs of belonging, no matter how many they are.*¹⁰¹

Moreover, with his choice Bonito Oliva held off two of the most excellent artists, who had been the forerunners of the tendencies theorized by Transavantgarde: Luigi Ontani and Salvatore Mangione, *aka* Salvo. These artists were the foundation stones of Renato Barilli's group. Altogether twenty artists had access to this sort of Noah's Arch.¹⁰² Compared to Transavantgarde, this was the major, programmatic difference brought by Nuovi-nuovi. With two corollaries: firstly, from an artistic point of view the new-new artists had different levels of quality; secondly, painting was still the preferred medium, but other artistic media were allowed and also sculptors were included in the group. So, as it could have been easily imagined by comparing an exclusive, smaller club as Transavantgarde to a more inclusive and big group like Nuovi-nuovi, the former appears as more homogeneous, both in terms of quality and style. The selection of equally important painters was certainly one of the criteria employed by Achille Bonito Oliva, who was very careful in choosing to place in the market only optimal products. The need for a homogeneous group was so important in Transavantgarde that the presence in it of Nicola De Maria had always been considered as a sort of encroachment, because his non-figurative style was quite far from the one used by his companions. And again, the inclusion of De Maria in Transavantgarde seems to be explained more by commercial criteria than by other factors. In the Nuovi-nuovi group there were both important figurative and non-figurative artists.

Having a closer look at the two critics, Barilli and Bonito Oliva, further interesting elements can be considered. First of all, while the proverbial ego of Bonito Oliva made him a lone wolf, Barilli worked together with other two young

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² The metaphor of *Nuovi-nuovi* as a Noah's Arch for artists is used in Barilli 2006 (cf. note 99), p. 55.

professors in Bologna: Roberto Daolio (1948–2013) and Francesca Alinovi (1948–1983).¹⁰³ In a way, Barilli was the leading and most prominent figure of a pool of critics scouting new talents and curating their exhibitions.



Figure 36 Alighiero Boetti, *Mappa (Map)*, 1979, Embroidery on canvas, dimensions not specified, London, Tate Modern, Courtesy Gladstone Gallery NY & Brussels.

Barilli was probably a more valuable academician than Bonito Oliva; for sure, the latter had a gift for marketing. The term ‘Transavanguardia’ invented by Bonito Oliva is ingenious: it immediately works, giving the idea of the meaning of this movement; it can be easily translated in other languages and understood outside of Italy. The name chosen by Barilli for his group is awful: the same term, ‘new’ repeated twice, a problem for any word-processor or web browser; even worse, ‘new’ is in itself something that cannot stand alone (new compared to what?) and is ephemeral (something newer will appear soon). From a marketing point of view, the name of the group was disastrous and it

¹⁰³ Francesca Alinovi was the tragic victim of the so-called “Murder of DAMS”. A young, talented and successful art critic, she was killed by 47 stab wounds in her flat in Bologna on 12.06.1983. This crime made a lot of noise in Italy. Francesco Ciancabilla, an artist and student at DAMS, was found guilty and sentenced to 18 years. This story and its implications (e.g. good-looking victim, promiscuity, cocaine, etc.) tell a lot of Italy, Bologna and DAMS in those years. To learn more about it, see Melchionda 2007 Achille Melchionda, *Francesca Alinovi. 47 coltellate*; Bologna, Edizioni Pendragon, 2007.

never worked. Probably none of its five protagonists would have problems even today in being referred to as Transavantgarde artists. Most of the twenty new-new artists would hardly accept to be labelled as Nuovi-nuovi. When Barilli was thinking of this adjective 'new', the benchmark he had in mind was Arte Povera. In fact, the critic had been one of the most active promoters of such a movement, second in this activity probably only to its creator Germano Celant.

In 1970 Barilli had curated at the Bologna Gallery of Modern Art the collective exhibition entitled *Gennaio '70* (January 1970). There, many *poveristi* were presented, even if in an unorthodox way, trying to create a dialectic contrast with other, more eccentric and pop artists.¹⁰⁴ In the same venue, opening on March 15, 1980, Barilli was requested to curate an exhibition that was a survey of the contemporary artistic scene, exactly ten years after that event and in continuity with it. And the complete title of the exhibition was: *Dieci anni dopo. I Nuovi nuovi* (Ten years later. The New new-ones). The name of the group originated there. It implied that these artists were new compared to the Arte Povera artists. Barilli employed in many essays the classical method of polar opposites as a tool to understand Art history.¹⁰⁵ In a similar way to the Law of Action-Reaction in Physics, in Art different phases can be observed, corresponding to couples of opposites, such as: functional/ornamental, progressive/reactionary, objective/subjective, innovative/traditional, cold/warm, and so on. Like a pendulum, Art continuously moves from going forth towards the maximum progress and evolution to going back towards the past and involution. After the revolution of '68 and Arte Povera, a new generation of artists, whose early works could often be referred to as Conceptual Art, were following a path that some critics compared to the so-called *Retour à l'ordre* after the First World War.¹⁰⁶ Of course, some elements of this new, implosive phase were already present in some champions of Arte

¹⁰⁴ Among such artists: Ugo Nespolo (1941), Giuseppe Uncini (1929–2008), Gino Marotta (1935–2012), Mario Ceroli (1938). See Barilli 1980 Renato Barilli, *Dieci anni dopo*, in: *Dieci anni dopo. I Nuovi nuovi*, ed. by Renato Barilli; Bologna, Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Grafis Edizioni, 1980, p. 8.

¹⁰⁵ The pioneer of this method was Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945). See Barilli 2006 (cf. note 99), p. 19.

¹⁰⁶ See, for instance, Barilli 2009 (cf. note 100), p. 33.

Povera: in a period marked by the use of black and white in Art, Alighiero Boetti (1940–1994) introduced a feast of colours in his famous embroidered maps (fig. 36); Luciano Fabro (1936 –2007) used ‘rich’ materials, such as marble, bronze or gold (fig. 37). But a key figure was Giulio Paolini (1940), probably the most important living Italian artist.¹⁰⁷ On one hand, Paolini was a very progressive artist, well integrated in an avant-garde movement like Arte Povera: he never painted with brush, he rather used photos or pencil to add elegant drawings to his works, usually installations. On the other hand, unlike many of his companions, Paolini was looking at the past, interested in the icons of ancient Masters such as Raffaello, Poussin or Canova.



Figure 37 Luciano Fabro, *L'Italia d'Oro (Golden Italy)*, 1971, Gilded bronze and steel cable, 75 x 45 cm, Madrid, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Rein Sofia.

¹⁰⁷ For a better understanding of the important role played by Paolini in the international contemporary context, see for instance Rorimer 2001 Anne Rorimer, *New Art in the 60s and 70s. Redefining Reality*; London, Thames and Hudson, 2001, p. 64–69.

In his citations, Paolini was always careful in marking the chronological distance with his models, either by varying their scale or by fragmenting them (fig. 38). Through such citations Paolini was able to address the major themes of the artistic research of his time: the role of institutions in Art, the relationship between works and beholders, as well as the spatial value of a work of art.



Figure 38 Giulio Paolini, *Casa di Lucrezio (House of Lucretius)*, 1981, Six plaster casts, two fractured plaster casts, fabrics, fragments of carved plaster tablet, matt white plinths, Eight plinths 120 x 30 x 30 cm each, overall dimensions variable, Turin, Marco Noire Contemporary Art.

The passion for what is in museums and the habit of quoting styles that were worlds apart from the contemporary taste were also typical of Giorgio De Chirico (1888–1978). He had again a period of great popularity in the 1980s,

partially due to his recent death and the celebrations for the centenary of his birth, but above all because his discourse, for many years considered too far from the *zeitgeist*, had all of a sudden become absolutely contemporary.¹⁰⁸

The hypothesis that the roots of the new tendencies had to be looked for in Arte Povera was confirmed by the fact that the two forerunners already mentioned, Ontani and Salvo, were artists represented by the main gallerist for Arte Povera, Gian Enzo Sperone (1939) in Turin.

As discussed so far, Transavantgarde and Nuovi-nuovi differed especially in the marketing strategy adopted by their mentors. However, from both a theoretical and an artistic point of view, similarities were predominant. The common field for both was the end of avant-gardism and the Darwinistic idea of evolution in Art History. For sure, only Barilli admitted that the origins of his group were in Arte Povera. Compared to *Transavanguardisti*, the new-new artists were probably more inclined to explicitly quote artists belonging to the past. They were less afraid to push the envelope by producing works that could be easily defined as *kitsch*.¹⁰⁹ With the partial exception of Francesco Clemente, the solutions adopted by the Nuovi-nuovi were less aggressive, generating images closer to the electronic, pixel-based ones that were starting invading reality. In Barilli's partial words, Transavantgarde's were "brutalist, neo-expressionist solutions" whereas Nuovi-nuovi's were "intentionally light, elegant, delightfully arabesque solutions".¹¹⁰

Having a look at the history of exhibitions, Renato Barilli was certainly a precursor in interpreting the symptoms of the upcoming artistic research with the exhibition that he curated in 1974 for Studio Marconi in Milan: *Ripetizione differente*.¹¹¹ Barilli and Alinovi curated another prodromal exhibition in 1979, again in Milan, entitled: *Pittura-ambiente* (Paint-Space), just few months

¹⁰⁸ For a comprehensive introduction to De Chirico's work, see for instance Calvesi 1988 Maurizio Calvesi, *De Chirico nel centenario della nascita*; Milan, Mondadori, 1988.

¹⁰⁹ Kitsch is defined as: "Pieces of art or other objects that appeal to popular or uncultivated taste, as in being garish or overly sentimental." From: THEFREEDICTIONARY 2014 THEFREEDICTIONARY, web page, 2015, <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/>, last access 21.02.2015.

¹¹⁰ Barilli 2009 (cf. note 100), p. 46.

¹¹¹ Cf. note 5.

before the first exhibition with the “fabulous five” organized by Bonito Oliva in Acireale. Then, in 1980 the Nuovi-nuovi group was born with the already mentioned exhibition in Bologna. The whole group was gathered in 1982 in Genoa for the significant exhibition: *Una generazione postmoderna* (A Postmodern Generation). Afterwards, the most important exhibition for the group was the one held in Turin, at the GAM (Galleria d’Arte Moderna) in 1995, a sort of a survey of its artists after fifteen years of activity.

A selection of Nuovi-nuovi was presented also in the United States. In fall 1980, Francesca Alinovi organized an exhibition entitled *Italian Wave* in the Holly Solomon Gallery in New York City. Holly Solomon was the gallerist representing Pattern and Decoration, who had a lot in common with the Italian group and in some way shared a common fate of being generally underestimated.¹¹² Some years later, in 1986, Barilli curated a series of exhibition in Northern America under the common title: *Icons of Postmodernism*.

If over time many exhibitions were organized for Transavantgarde, the larger number of artists involved in Nuovi-nuovi made it difficult to have occasions to exhibit the whole bunch. One of the latest was an attempt at revival made by Barilli and Daolio in 2009, almost thirty years after the first exhibition in Bologna. This travelling exhibition that moved from Florence to Parma and then to Alessandria had the ironic title of *Siamo sempre Nuovi-nuovi* (We are always New-new ones).

More often, the new-new artists were exhibited in smaller groups, most of the times distinguishing two main sub-groups: the figurative artists and the non-figurative artists. In the following paragraphs, the components of Nuovi-nuovi will be analysed following this same criterion and introducing a third sub-group, composed of the artists whose research was about the third dimension of the space. Before doing that, more words have to be dedicated to the two leaders of Nuovi-nuovi, Ontani and Salvo, who both can be counted in the figurative subset.

¹¹² See the Introduction to the present work, section 1.4.

3.1 Luigi Ontani

Luigi Ontani was a genius, who often anticipated solutions adopted by other major artists many years later. In his work the autobiographical element has always been essential. Ontani was born near Bologna, in the same place where also Guido Reni (1575–1642) and Giorgio Morandi (1890–1964) were born and these artists will be a constant reference for him. His village was at the bottom of a hill, Montovolo (962m), whose name contains, maybe because of its shape, the term 'egg' that will be a recurrent symbol in his works. On the same hills there was a XIX century castle, called Rocchetta Mattei, which was an eccentric fusion of oriental, medieval, Moorish and liberty styles (fig. 39).



Figure 39 Rocchetta Mattei, Grizzana Morandi, Bologna.

Not only did the presence of such a peculiar architecture in his home village have some influence in his education, but also the castle would become the venue to host a museum dedicated to Ontani. Ontani himself stated the

importance of all the mentioned coincidences characterizing the place of his childhood.¹¹³



Figure 40 Ontani's show at Franz Paludetto Gallery, Turin, via Accademia Albertina 3, 1970.

¹¹³ See, for instance, Ontani 2004 Luigi Ontani, *Ontani secondo Ontani*, in: *Luigi Ontani. OntanElegia*, ed. by Alessandra Galasso; Turin, Allemandi, 2004, p. 14.

Between 1963 and 1965, Ontani was conscripted in Turin, where he had the chance to come into contact with Arte Povera that had its main centre there. Back to Bologna, where he had his first solo show in 1967, Ontani frequented artists who shared the same ideas of such a movement.¹¹⁴ Consequently, Ontani's first works were influenced by Arte Povera. The series of *Oggetti pleonastici* (Pleonastic Objects), produced between 1965 and 1969, were household objects either modelled or casted in a humble material like plaster. The exquisite use of colours was their distinguishing factor. In *La stanza delle similitudini* (The Room of Similitudes), realised in 1969, Ontani employed another poor material, corrugated fibreboard, to cut elements that once again resembled domestic objects (fig. 40). As suggested also by the title, Ontani dedicated these works to French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984).¹¹⁵

Between 1969 and 1972 Ontani produced a series of 17 Super 8 mm films.¹¹⁶ With a duration spanning between 3 and 12 minutes, the early black and white videos were often filmed by a fixed camera, documenting minimal, repeated actions. Such videos were in line with the most advanced contemporary research of body and performance artists in Europe and America.¹¹⁷ Some later videos were filmed in colours and some reached the remarkable duration of 40 minutes. The apex of this phase of the artist's career was his participation, thanks to Gerry Schum (1938–1973), at the 1972 Venice

¹¹⁴ Namely, Vasco Bendini (1922–2015), a master of the previous generation, who had anticipated solutions of Arte Povera, even if he never joined the group, and Pier Paolo Calzolari (1943), who became one of the youngest artists organic to it.

¹¹⁵ In particular, Ontani's works referred to *Les Mots et les Choses (Une archéologie des sciences humaines)*, (*The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*), published by the French philosopher in 1966. The book was animating the cultural debate of the time. It would be impossible to analyse all the implications here. Some further cues are suggested in Galasso 2004 Alessandra Galasso, *Il cantore delle similitudini*, in: *Luigi Ontani. OntanElegia*, ed. by Alessandra Galasso; Turin, Allemandi, 2004, p. 41–43.

¹¹⁶ For a detailed list of Ontani's videos, see Galasso 2004 Alessandra Galasso, *Glossario. Alcuni termini fondamentali per comprendere l'opera di Ontani*, in: *Luigi Ontani. OntanElegia*, ed. by Alessandra Galasso; Turin, Allemandi, 2004, p. 179.

¹¹⁷ The history of Video Art is beautifully summarized in the first chapter of Horowitz 2011 Noah Horowitz, *Art of the Deal. Contemporary Art in a Global Financial Market*; Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011, p. 26–86. Unfortunately, Ontani's name has been omitted therein.

Biennale with *Fuochezza*, a video that was a remake of an earlier video of his, but filmed at the Biennale.¹¹⁸



Figure 41 Luigi Ontani, *San Sebastiano nel bosco di Calvenzano, d'après Guido Reni* (Saint Sebastian in the Woods of Calvenzano), 1970, Table vivant and colour photo, 70 x 100 cm, Rome, Fabio Sargentini Collection .

¹¹⁸ Gerry Schum was a German gallerist and art dealer who played a key role in the history of Video Art. He tragically took his own life in March 1973. His story is briefly told in Horowitz 2011 (cf. note 117), p. 36–38.

In 1969, with *Ange infidèle*, Ontani made the first item of the outstanding series of *Tableaux vivants*, characterized by an innovative use of photography.¹¹⁹ The subject was always the artist himself and his own body, portrayed in the act of reinterpreting historical, mythological, literary and popular themes. Thus, photography was not recording, as it was usually supposed to do, the *hic et nunc*, but rather the opposite *illic et tunc*.¹²⁰ The photos were never produced in editions and the format was either a small one or a gigantic one, the latter being quite a challenge for the technology available at the time.

For a particular subset of these works, the term *D'après* was used, because Ontani was taking inspiration from existing artworks of the past. One of the most significant was *San Sebastiano nel bosco di Calvenzano, d'après Guido Reni* (Saint Sebastian in the Woods of Calvenzano, from Guido Reni), dated 1970 (fig. 41). The subject of the Christian praetorian killed during the Roman emperor Diocletian's persecution had been represented plenty of times in art, depicted in the traditional iconography as a handsome youth pierced by arrows.¹²¹ Such an iconography also became "the single most successfully deployed image of modern male gay identity."¹²² Ontani was a homosexual, who had to confront with the difficulties of dealing with his identity in a Catholic country like Italy. Another famous homosexual intellectual, Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975), who was fighting his own battle against conformism and discrimination in Italy, curiously anticipated in his 1962 movie *La ricotta* (Curd

¹¹⁹ The French term means 'living picture'. It describes a group of costumed actors or models, carefully posed and often theatrically lit, who do not speak or move throughout the duration of the display. For a comprehensive list of Ontani's *Tableaux Vivants*, see Galasso 2004 (cf. note 116), p. 176–177.

¹²⁰ Photography was framing not the 'here and now', but the 'there and then'.

¹²¹ According to the Christian tradition, Saint Sebastian (256–288) was a Roman captain of the Praetorian Guard under Diocletian, coming from Narbo Martius, now Narbonne. During Emperor Diocletian's persecution of Christians, he commanded him to be led to a field and there to be bound to a stake so that archers would shoot arrows at him. Despite this is the common representation of the Saint, he was apparently rescued and healed from this torment. He was later clubbed to death because he had dared criticizing Diocletian in person.

¹²² Statement by Richard A. Kaye in: *Losing His Religion: Saint Sebastian as Contemporary Gay Martyr*, published in: *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Cultures*, ed. by Peter Horne and Reina Lewis; London, Routledge, 1996, p. 87. Quoted in: Mecugni 2011 Anna Mecugni, *A desperate 'vitality'. Tableaux vivants in the works of Pasolini and Ontani (1963–1974)*, in: *Palinsesti. Contemporary Italian Art On-line Journal* n.2/2011, p. 111, available at <http://www.academia.edu/>, last access 27.03.15.

Cheese) the staging of famous paintings of the Renaissance as tableaux vivants.¹²³

For Ontani, Reni's Sebastian reveals not only the androgynous sensuality of a male youth, but also, more generally, the ambiguity that art can convey.

Compared with Reni's figure – a beautiful, anaemic youth who glances heavenward and placidly surrenders to his own destiny, his body set against a menacing sky – Ontani's version lacks any references to pain [...].¹²⁴



Figure 42 Luigi Ontani, *SabineRatto D'après David (The Rape of the Sabine Women)*, 1974, Table vivant and colour photo, 70 x 100 cm, Actual location not specified.

¹²³ *La ricotta* was the episode filmed by Pasolini within the omnibus movie *Ro.Go.Pa.G.*, in which a director played by Orson Welles is producing a film called *The Passion*, trying to reproduce poses of mannerist paintings by Pontorno (1494–1557) and Rosso Fiorentino (1494–1540). The connections between Pasolini's and Ontani's works have been pointed out by many critics. For instance, this is the main subject of Mecugni 2011 (cf. note 122).

¹²⁴ Mecugni 2011 (cf. note 122), p. 111.

Ontani chose Saint Sebastian “for my vanity [...] and as an image for my story, as a self-portrait, it is a definition of my own personality, but also of my origins. [...] The woods of Calvenzano, where Guido Reni was born is where I was born too.”¹²⁵ Thus, Ontani staged his work in the real place, an autobiographical connection between both of the artists. Ontani revisited the same subject many other times and in 1970 made another *D’après* from Guido Reni: *Ecce Homo*. In it, Ontani portrayed himself as Christ in the crown of thorns, keeping in his hand a reproduction of the original work by Reni.¹²⁶ A similar solution of showing the original artwork within his own was adopted by Ontani in his homage to Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), dated 1974: while adopting the same pose as one of the characters depicted by the French artist, Ontani was pointing the finger at the image of the Louvre painting (fig. 42).

Ontani never untitled his works and the given titles have always been peculiar: with a lot of irony, he used to play with words, finding assonances and double meanings to build new terms, capable of providing the works with further, unsuspected connotations. For this reason his titles were often impossible to be translated in other languages. The most common source of his puns was his own name, Ontani. In fact, the term ‘*ontani*’ in Italian corresponded to the trees of the genus *Alnus*, known in English as ‘alder’. The name had also a sound similar to the biblical character Onan.¹²⁷ At last, also the word ‘anus’ was recalled by the final portion of his name, with obvious connections to the homosexual pleasure. The artist played with all these elements, and with many others, too.

¹²⁵ Translated by the author. Ontani 2004 (cf. note 113), p. 13.

¹²⁶ Guido Reni’s work is in the collection of Pinacoteca di Bologna (National Art Gallery of Bologna).

¹²⁷ Onan is the protagonist of an episode told in the Book of Genesis chapter 38. After Onan’s brother Er was slain by God, his father Judah told him to fulfil his duty as a brother-in-law to Tamar. When Onan had sex with her, he withdrew before climax and “spilled his seed on the ground”, since any child born would not legally be considered his heir. He disregarded the principle of a levirate union, so God slew him.



Figure 43 Juxtaposition of:

Caravaggio, *Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, 1593, Oil on canvas, 70 x 67 cm, Rome, Galleria Borghese (left).

Luigi Ontani, *D'Après Caravaggio*, 1977, Photograph hand-painted by the artist, in gilded frame, 60 x 50 cm, Rome, Fabio Sargentini Collection (right).



Figure 44 Juxtaposition of:

Caravaggio, *Young Sick Bacchus*, 1593, Oil on canvas, 67 x 53 cm, Rome, Galleria Borghese (left).

Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #224 after Caravaggio*, 1990, Edition of 6, 120 x 95 cm, New York, courtesy Metro Pictures (right).

Another important element for Ontani was the framing of his works; he was very careful with this aspect, which was often neglected by his contemporaries, even if it belonged to a glorious crafts tradition. The frames were often in gilded wood and had a thin and convex design.



Figure 45 Luigi Ontani, *Krishna*, 1976, Photograph hand-painted by the artist, in gilded frame, 31 x 38 cm, Rome, Lorcan O'Neill Gallery.

During the first half of the 1970s Ontani produced many Tableaux vivants that anticipated solutions that became very popular in the following decade with artists such as the American Cindy Sherman (1954) and the Japanese Yasumasa Morimura (1951).¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Cindy Sherman moved to New York after her graduation in 1976 and began shooting some self-portraits in 1977, before finding her way in 1980. Ontani, who was experimenting with this style of Tableaux vivants since 1969, had had a solo show at Galerie Sonnabend in Paris in 1976 and at Sonnabend Gallery in New York in 1977, the very year of Sherman's first experiments with photos. It



Figure 46 Luigi Ontani, *Tre Grazie - Lo Scultore e il Modello (The Three Graces – The Sculptor and the Model)*, 1980, Watercolour on paper, 232 x 152 cm, Rome, Artist's Collection.

Ontani also travelled a lot throughout the world, especially to India, always acquiring new elements of knowledge about different cultures and traditions that he included in his works. In India he rediscovered the technique of hand-colouring photographs by applying watercolours. This method had been very

is only speculation, because the American artist never confirmed having taken inspiration from Ontani, but it would be hard to believe she did not know his work (see fig. 43 and fig. 44).

popular in the Western world, when the photos were still in black and white, to be abandoned later with the diffusion of colour photography. In India it was still a very popular technique. From 1976 Ontani started retouching all his photos with watercolours, achieving even more original and imaginative results than before (fig. 45). This use of watercolour led Ontani to rediscover painting in general: he began to produce delightful, elegant watercolours on paper. Indeed, he preferred this painting technique to oil, because watercolour is characterized by levity, delicacy and transparency, emphasizing lines and the importance of drawing (fig. 46). In this choice for painting, Ontani was a forerunner, in so deserving his prominent place among the Nuovi-nuovi group.



Figure 47 Luigi Ontani, *Pinealissima (Very Pineal)*, 1982, Mask, 20.3 x 14.5 x 13.5 cm, Brussels, Lucien Bilinelli Collection.

In his watercolours, Ontani explored his favoured themes, the same ones he had impersonated in the previous photos. The most important *topoi*, which in some way interconnected, were the theme of the double and the theme of the androgyne. The androgyne, symbol of sexual ambiguity, was the resolution of the double.¹²⁹ The double, a key theme also for his friend Alighiero Boetti, was a leitmotif in Ontani, represented with Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, David and Goliath, Castor and Pollux, Romulus and Remus, Janus Bifrons, etc. The same motif was connected to Ontani's interest in masks, a central theme in Philosophy being connected to "the problem of the relationship between being and appearing."¹³⁰ Ontani first came into contact with the Italian tradition of *Commedia dell'arte*, then he carried out a study on masks across the world, during his frequent travels.¹³¹ He started commissioning masks to foreign craftsmen, providing them with some instructions, but leaving room for their personal experience and local background (fig. 47). For instance, he commissioned a mask of Pinocchio to legendary Balinese mask maker Ida Bagus Anom (1953).¹³² If Pinocchio was very well known in most of the Western countries, it was completely ignored in Bali.¹³³ Ontani gave a drawing to the mask maker, who used his own imagination and sensibility to produce a tridimensional object. The final result was a hybrid, mixing Ontani's and Ida Bagus Anom's vision (fig. 48). Ontani employed the same methodology for the production of works in glass and in ceramic that he started commissioning to Italian craftsmen in the mid-1980s.¹³⁴

¹²⁹ The myth of the androgyne was introduced by Plato (428/427–348/347 BCE) in his *The Symposium*, dated c. 385–370 BC.

¹³⁰ Vattimo 1974 Gianni Vattimo, *Il soggetto e la maschera: Nietzsche e il problema della liberazione*; Milan, Bompiani, 2007, p. 11.

¹³¹ *Commedia dell'arte* was a form of theatre, performed by professional actors and characterized by masked 'types'. It began in Italy in the 16th century.

¹³² This episode is told in Galasso 2004 (cf. note 115), p. 47.

¹³³ Pinocchio was the fictional protagonist of the 1883 novel by Carlo Collodi (1826–1890).

¹³⁴ Ontani used to commission his ceramic works to Venera Finocchiaro in Rome, to Bottega Gatti in Faenza, and lately to the Terraviva laboratory in Vietri. For the glass works, the artist collaborated with the glassmaker Seguso in Murano. See Galasso 2004 (cf. note 116), p. 160 and p. 178.



Figure 48 Luigi Ontani, *PinOcchio* (Untranslatable pun playing with the words *Pinocchio*, *pineal gland* and *parietal eye*), 1981, Mask in pule wood, Diameter 70 cm, Rome, Lorcan O'Neill Gallery.

The works in ceramic, colourful, ironic and playful, were another major achievement in Ontani's artistic career (fig. 49). Italy had had a strong tradition of ceramics, with many specialized sites in Capodimonte, Faenza, Vietri, etc.

In the 20th century the main centre was Albisola in Liguria, where artists began practicing and producing their works. The phenomenon started with Futurism and had a flourishing season in the 1950s with Lucio Fontana and many artists coming from all over the world. Ontani renewed this tradition, becoming one of the major artists in this niche medium.



Figure 39 Luigi Ontani solo show at Lorcan O'Neill Gallery in Rome, January 2008.

3.2 Salvo

Salvo, born in Sicily, moved to Turin in 1956 and had his first solo show there, at Sperone Gallery in 1970, when he was 22 years old. He presented twelve *Self-portraits*, executed with the technique of photomontage. Salvo had drawn some photos from newspapers and magazines and had applied his face in the place of the portrayed people, revealing remarkable skills in manipulating images in a pre-Photoshop age. In these portraits the artist played the roles of a factory worker, a guerrilla, a barman, a dancer, and so on (fig. 50).



Figure 50 Salvo, *12 Autoritratti (12 Self-portraits)*, 1969, Photo, 135 x 255 cm, Private collection, actual location not specified.

Salvo chose no heroes, but ordinary people representing social categories. On the one hand, Salvo was still under Duchamp's influence, because he was presenting something that the French genius would have called 'Rectified Ready-mades', and on the other hand there were symptoms of a new attitude. One of the main tendencies of Conceptual art had been the 'dematerialization' of the object of art. As pointed out by British artist Keith Arnatt (1930–2008), commenting on his own work *Self-Burial* of 1969: "The continual reference to the disappearance of the art object suggested to me the eventual disappearance of the artist himself. The photographic sequence may be seen as a metaphor for this imagined impending condition."¹³⁵

Thus, Salvo was reaffirming the centrality of the author's role that had been at risk during the last few years dominated by conceptual artists. In the following works, he went further, by representing the demiurgic power of the artist. In fact, he portrayed himself as a Christ blessing the cities of Brescia and Lucerne (fig. 51). Salvo then started a narcissistic self-promotion that was reminiscent of De Chirico's way to sign-off the works as *Pictor optimus*. Indeed, he produced a series of marble stones, where he engraved various inscriptions,

¹³⁵ Quoted in Wood 2002 Paul Wood, *Conceptual Art*; London, Tate Publishing, 2002, p. 37.

including an Italian translation of De Chirico's epigraph, *Io sono il migliore* (I am the greatest, fig. 52).



Figure 51 Salvo, *Benedizione di Lucerna (Blessing of Lucerne)*, 1970, Photo, 110 x 88 cm, Berlin, Paul Maenz Collection.

“The deliberately redundant and rhetorical *Tablets* provide confirmation of an approach to artistic research that simultaneously aims at the assertion of the artist's own individuality and the recognition of the work's universality.”¹³⁶ These marble works also confirmed that Salvo, in using such a precious and classical material, was moving away from Arte Povera and its poor, new-to-art materials.¹³⁷ Between 1971 and 1973, Salvo substituted any iconography with his own name, using the three colours of the Italian flag as his exclusive palette “to signify his belonging to a precise cultural background and his descent from

¹³⁶ Eccher 1998 Danilo Eccher, *A Frontier for Painting*, in: *Salvo*, ed. by Renato Barilli and Danilo Eccher; Milan, Electa, 1998, p. 19.

¹³⁷ Some critics disliked this choice at all; among them Catherine Millet, who wrote a negative review for *Art Press*, as reported in Barilli 2000 (cf. note 99), p. 30. The marble tombstones did receive also positive reactions: the one entitled *Salvo is alive* (1973) was acquired in 1980 by the Australian National Gallery in Canberra and it is still in its permanent collection.

an identifiable artistic genealogy in opposition to the internationalist trend that was leading the market [(fig. 53)].”¹³⁸



Figure 52 Salvo, *Io sono il migliore (I am the Greatest)*, 1970, Marble gravestone, 60 x 70 cm, Milan, Private Collection.

Provocatively looking for immediate fame, Salvo decided to have no works presented at *Documenta V* in Kassel in 1972, but he got his own name listed in the catalogue’s roll of invited artists, in larger print than the other names. It was a curious operation, many years before similar actions by Maurizio Cattelan (1960).¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Castagnoli 2007 Pier Giovanni Castagnoli, *Seasons of history, seasons of painting*, in: *Salvo*, ed. by Pier Giovanni Castagnoli; Turin, Edizioni Fondazione Torino Musei - GAM, 2007, p. 19.

¹³⁹ In an interview, Cattelan said: “It is difficult as an artist to admit that you want to be famous. Being an artist has nothing to do with fame, but with art, that intangible thing that requires integrity. I believe, however, that we must admit that we want to be famous, otherwise we cannot be artists. Art and fame are the expression of a desire to live forever, the two things are closely related.” Quoted in: Perrella 1999 Cristiana Perrella, *When the Artist Becomes the (Lead) Actor. The beginnings of Salvo’s art through his self-portraits*, in: *Salvo*, ed. by Luca Beatrice; Milan, Charta, 1999, p. 40.



Figure 53 Salvo, *Tricolore (Tricolour)*, 1973, Painting on newspaper, 59 x 85 cm, Berlin, Paul Maenz Collection.

In 1973 Salvo decided, as a forerunner, to distance himself from the works produced by his colleagues and to go back to painting; in a later interview he made this statement:

I never meant to be part of a group, but only a widespread need to express oneself with new means. At a certain point, I sensed the monotony that is also in this: anyone who goes into a gallery and hangs a reproduction of Botticelli's Venus after having thrown bottles of paint at it will make a good impression. I thus ask myself: if, apart from everything else, these people want to exhibit their works in painting museums, why shouldn't I take on the painting challenge? Why should I deny myself the pleasure of colour? And despite the perplexity I noticed in Paul Maenz's eyes at my first painting exhibition, for me, painting has become something like Mount Everest for Hillary. We think Hillary conquered Mount Everest, but in actual fact it was Mount Everest that conquered Hillary: after his feat, he never left Nepal and he still lives at the

*foot of the mountain. I have literally been conquered by painting: it is something that opens spaces for me, it opens my knowledge, my mind.*¹⁴⁰



Figure 54 Salvo, *Autoritratto come San Martino (Self-portrait as Saint Martin)*, 1973, Watercolours on paper, 308 x 198 cm, Weimer, Neues Museum, formerly Paul Maenz Collection.

¹⁴⁰ Salvo referred here to German gallerist Paul Maenz, who organized a solo exhibition in Cologne in 1973. Sir Edmund Percival Hillary (1919–2008) was a New Zealand mountaineer, who became the first climber to reach the summit of Mount Everest (8,848 m, Earth's highest mountain) in 1953. Quoted in Castagnoli 2007 (cf. note 138), p. 11.

For his own, solitary climb on the Mount Everest of painting, Salvo chose to refer to masters of the Renaissance, Cosmè Tura (1430–1495) and Raphael (1483–1520), receiving mixed reactions (fig. 54).



Figure 55 Salvo, *80 pittori italiani in rosso (80 Italian Painters in Red)*, 1976, Oil on board, 78 x 67.5 cm, Ulm, FER Collection.

In July 1974 the important exhibition *Projekt '74* was inaugurated in Cologne. While the other artists were exhibiting in the regular exhibition venue, the Kunsthalle, Salvo subverted the rules and obtained permission to exhibit in the Wallraf-Richartz Museum, where ancient artworks were displayed. Salvo rearranged the works, in order to have an ideal path through art history, choosing a painting to represent every century. So, after masterpieces by Simone Martini (1284–1344), Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553), Rembrandt (1606–1669) and Cezanne (1839–1906), a work by Salvo was

representing the XX century: *San Martino e il povero* (Saint Martin and the pauper), after El Greco (1541–1614), painted by Salvo one year earlier.¹⁴¹ It was for sure an important milestone in the history of quotational art.

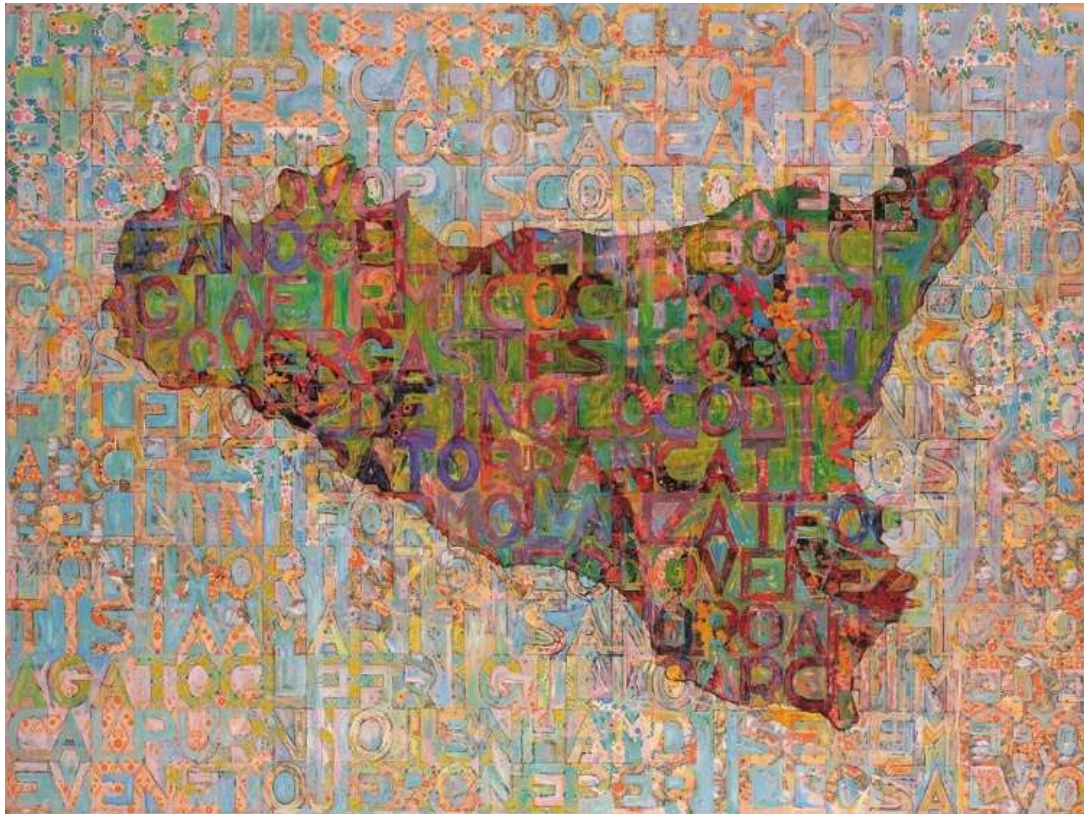


Figure 56 Salvo, *Sicilia (Sicily)*, 1975, Oil on board, 150 x 199 cm, Milan, Antonio Colombo Collection.

Gianni Pozzi (1953) wrote:

*In this return to painting he undertook a style of painting that seems awkward and clumsy combined with the largest rank in the hierarchy, the historical-allegorical genre, which he parodies a little and reinvents a little. This elevated genre clearly serves to maintain distances, to make it clear that this is not really painting, that Salvo is not attempting to invent anything.*¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ Salvo told the following anecdote: "When I said it was me who had done the last picture, the custodian said 'Get out!'" Quoted in: Perrella 1999 (cf. note 139), p. 40.

¹⁴² Pozzi 1999 Gianni Pozzi, *Landscapes of Invention*, in: *Salvo*, ed. by Luca Beatrice; Milan, Charta, 1999, p. 54–55.

Barilli focussed on the particular palette used by Salvo in these works, where “colour assumed a major role, while maintaining the brilliance of the animated cartoon or of television [...]. There was, however, always a limit that was imposed as soon as the use of colour got out of control; hence Salvo’s palette always remained pure, with Pre-Raphaelitic overtones [...]”.¹⁴³



Figure 57 Salvo, *Cavalieri tra le rovine al crepuscolo (Knights in the Ruins at Dusk)*, 1978, Oil on canvas, 80 x 119 cm, Private Collection, actual location not specified.

From December 1974 to 1976 Salvo painted the series of *Italie* (Italies) and *Sicilie* (Sicilies); they were geographic maps, bearing the names of illustrious people (i.e. artists, philosophers, musicians, etc.), including Salvo himself (fig. 55 and fig. 56). These works could have been influenced by *Arazzi* (Tapestries) and *Mappe* (Maps) by Alighiero Boetti, whom Salvo had met in 1968 at Sperone’s, becoming a friend of his.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Barilli 1995 Renato Barilli, *The Nuovi-nuovi. Past, present and future*, in: *I Nuovi-nuovi*, ed. by Renato Barilli and Roberto Daolio; Milan, RCS/Fabbri Editori, 1995, p. 176.

¹⁴⁴ Apart from an apparent similarity, Salvo was using painting instead of tapestries. Moreover, Boetti through the geographical maps had posed questions on the actual world political situation and had

At the 1976 Venice Biennale, Salvo exhibited a huge *Trionfo di San Giorgio* (Triumph of Saint George) after Vittore Carpaccio (1465–1525/1526), receiving at last a positive feedback. In 1977 the artist had his first exhibitions in museums, being hosted in the Museum Folkwang in Essen and in the Mannheimer Kunsverein in Mannheim. It was a positive period for his career; many critics were appreciating his works and he also raised the interest of important collectors, such as Friedrich Erwin Rentschler (1932).¹⁴⁵



Figure 58 Salvo, *San Giovanni degli Eremitani (St. John of the Hermits)*, 1980, Oil on canvas, 130 x 95 cm, Private Collection, actual location not specified.

provided progressive messages through the words used in his *Arazzi*, while Salvo was using both the maps and the letters to celebrate his own roots and, more generally, the past.

¹⁴⁵ For further details, visit the website of the collection <http://fer-collection.de/>, last access 20.03.15; at the moment 6 works by Salvo are in the collection.

In the following years, Salvo seemed to have the intention of testing the various subjects in art, from the highest to the humblest genre; after the historical-allegorical genre, the series of *Capricci*, landscapes ennobled by temples, ruins and knights (fig. 57). Afterwards, the genre of everyday landscapes, more and more clichéd with some little houses and a bell-tower. “By 1979 he had completed the shift from one extreme to the other of painting genres, as if he wanted, in re-appropriating them, to bring a series of motifs, worn out with use and overly rigid practice, into the light once more [(fig. 58)].”¹⁴⁶



Figure 59 Salvo, *Paesaggio (Landscape)*, 1994, Oil on canvas, 160 x 270 cm, Private Collection, actual location not specified.

In an interview Salvo stated:

[...] I like to look for my subjects in the garbage can as well, to try them out in a very different situation. So why not? I might look in a little local market [...], where you can find pictures, with rural scenes, seascapes, little houses in

¹⁴⁶ Pozzi 1999 (cf. note 142), p. 55.

*mountain landscapes and, maybe, certain imitations of Neapolitan painters, those rainy scenes with a carriage, a horse cab, reflected in the wet surface of the road, while in the genre of figures you find clowns or old men with pipes, in other words the 'character'. Well, one day I too would like to paint a clown, really! I like the challenge: if you are good you can turn even the most trite and boring subject into a fine picture...*¹⁴⁷

The genre of landscape became Salvo's usual subject, repeated in every possible declension, in a manner similar to the one adopted by Giorgio Morandi (1890 –1964) with his still lifes. In this respect, Salvo used to quote a great American filmmaker: "John Ford once said [...], 'make the same film every time, just change the horse.'"¹⁴⁸

The style adopted by Salvo for these paintings was well described by Alessandra Galletta (1964):

*His clouds are almost always pink cotton-wool clouds; trees and bushes are round like balls; dawns and sunset are soft and mellow, shadows bluish with improbable colours; the vegetation is always recognizable – palm trees, cypresses, pines, bushes and shrubs are reassuringly familiar (fig. 59).*¹⁴⁹

Always risking a kitschy effect, Salvo depicted "spellbinding colours and glowing atmospheres".¹⁵⁰ If Salvo had looked at De Chirico for his recovery of museums, his later works, in their synthesis and suspended atmospheres, had an undeniable metaphysical character.

The second part of Salvo's career, however, "produced a negative effect, leading the less-qualified public and the more superficial front of art critics to misread the meaning of his adherence to painting and to construe it as a

¹⁴⁷ Auregli 1998 Dede Auregli, *Interview with Salvo*, in: *Salvo*, ed. by Renato Barilli and Danilo Eccher; Milan, Electa, 1998, p. 140.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Galletta 1999 Alessandra Galletta, *Salvo-style*, in: *Salvo*, ed. by Luca Beatrice; Milan, Charta, 1999, p. 62.

¹⁵⁰ Pozzi 1999 (cf. note 142), p. 59.

concession to a hedonistic taste that is more in line with market trends than with the consistency of a radically innovative poetic process.”¹⁵¹



Figure 60 Enrico Barbera, *Senza titolo (Untitled)*, 1983, Oil on canvas, 20 x 30 cm, Turin, Author's collection.

¹⁵¹ Castagnoli 2007 (cf. note 138), p. 15.

3.3 Figurative artists

Enrico Barbera (1947), after some early sculptures, decided to dedicate himself to painting. According to Barilli, his images gave the impression of being produced “by a sort of Aladdin’s lamp”, so that their origin was “ethereal and very spiritual.”¹⁵² The depicted forms seemed “to be linked to memories of childhood, for instance scrapbooks with Art Nouveau or Art Deco ornamentation [(fig. 60)].”¹⁵³

Bruno Benuzzi (1951), born in Sardinia, brought the Mediterranean light into his art. He never used black, only colours lighted by a zenithal sun that did not allow shadows. Convinced that straight lines were unnatural, Benuzzi started avoiding their use. He invented a particular technique for his art: he mixed varnishes and flour, in order to get a particular thickness that gave to his works both a curvy aspect and a tactile character. His use of a very small brush as his preferred tool resulted in a highly detailed, almost Flemish style. LP covers were a constant source of inspiration, so that the works by Benuzzi always had a pop aspect.

Antonio Faggiano (1946–2001) was a presence in the group, who did not abandon photography. He continued employing non-manual techniques, including photos in his installations. In conformity with the trend of the decade, Faggiano did not take his images from current newspapers, but rather “from the treasures of an encyclopaedia, possibly accompanied by hand-drawn illustrations, stylized clichés offering an appealing use of line.”¹⁵⁴ These images were treated in such a way that they always seemed filtered, under a veil and remote to the viewer (fig. 61).

Felice Levini (1956) has remained a conceptual artist, employing painting in his works and performances. Characterized, as Ontani was, by a significant

¹⁵² Barilli 1995 (cf. note 143), p. 177.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 176.

narcissism, Levini often staged himself in his works, full of magic and esoteric symbols of mysterious origin and meaning (fig. 62).



Figure 61 Antonio Michelangelo Faggiano, *Un'ora troppo tarda...* (A Too Late Hour...), 1981, Mixed media and photo on paper, 70 x 200 cm, Milan, Private Collection.



Figure 62 Felice Levini, *Io vedo, io sento, io parlo* (I see, I hear, I speak), 1982, Marker on silver PVC, 215 x 365 cm, Actual location not specified.

Against the general trend of the 1980s, Giorgio Pagano (1954) had been a very politically engaged artist. He was committed to the creation of the United States of Europe that in his vision was the only entity capable of achieving an

artistic leadership in the world.¹⁵⁵ His art was a visual tool for the diffusion of his ideas; he used to contaminate images with letters, in order to convey his slogans and to build his utopia.



Figure 63 Giuseppe Salvatori, *L'addio alla pattuglia (Farewell to the patrol)*, 1989, Oil on canvas, 60 x 80.2 cm, Turin, Author's collection.

Giuseppe Salvatori (1955) was a painter akin to Metaphysical art. Pursuing a research similar to Salvo's, his favourite subjects were still lifes or architectural elements, but he also produced a series of imaginary city landscapes in the style of Ambrogio Lorenzetti (1290–1340). The aspect of these paintings gave the impression of images produced with the aid of a computer (fig. 63).

Walter Guidobaldi (1949), better known as Wal, was an artist “characterized by a certain instability, almost as if he felt the need, snakelike, to shed his skin at regular intervals, to throw off his old guise and assume a brand new one [...]”.¹⁵⁶ He started depicting pop images taken from comic strips and children's

¹⁵⁵ More information on Giorgio Pagano's political vision are available in his profile in www.linkedin.com, last access 06.03.15.

¹⁵⁶ Barilli 2003 Renato Barilli, *The clever metamorphoses of an eternal child*, in: *Wal*, ed. by Renato Barilli and Massimo Mussini; Milan, Mazzotta, 2003, p. 16.

picture cards, but not just reproducing them as they were, rather colouring them emphasizing the hand-crafted process. Actually, this choice of iconography “was based on an entirely unconscious return to childhood memories, and sparked by an urge to leave behind the rational rigid confines of conceptual art and reinstate the free reign of [...] imagination [...]”.¹⁵⁷



Figure 64 Wal, *L'ape azzurra* (*The Blue Bee*), 1981, Oil on canvas, 45.5 x 45.5 cm, Parma, Galleria Centro Steccata.

Then, in the early 1980s, a new period began “in which Wal covered his canvases with hirsute images of bees and wasps, seen up close in almost

¹⁵⁷ Mussini 2003 Massimo Mussini, *Wal: the game of art*, in: *Wal*, ed. by Renato Barilli and Massimo Mussini; Milan, Mazzotta, 2003, p. 31.

microscopic enlargement”.¹⁵⁸ The resulting images, almost abstract at first sight, were a sort of dynamic representation of the desperate beating of wings of an insect trapped in a glass container (fig. 64). Thinking of Wal’s early works, this dynamism had connections to the conventional language of comics to illustrate movements and actions; however, these works were somehow quoting Futurism and its attempts at representing the constantly moving, dynamic world. With a new change in his style, in 1985 Wal started frequenting the third dimension, by producing plastic images of animals, sketched in schematic, post-cubistic squares.



Figure 65 Wal, *Parata (Parade)*, 2006, Painted terracotta and fiberglass, 87 x 78 x 55 cm, Parma, Galleria Centro Steccata.

¹⁵⁸ Barilli 2003 (cf. note 156), p. 17. Actually, the motif of the bee was a direct quotation of an emblem painted on French airplanes in WWI, which Wal had seen in a book on this subject: Angelini/Matricardi, *Guida agli aeroplani di tutto il mondo dalle origini alla prima guerra mondiale*; Milan, 1975, p. 112. This episode is told in Mussini 2003 (cf. note 157), p. 33.

In 1989 Wal came to his final leitmotiv, the putti, who became the protagonists of both his paintings and sculptures (fig. 65). “Wal wanted these putti to be the epitome of kitsch, with a shameless, uncontrolled, excessive angelicness: mischievous cherubs straight off a shelf crammed with souvenirs, cheap, tacky gift ornaments, paperweights and knick-knacks.”¹⁵⁹

The two most significant artists in this group, Marcello Jori (1951) and Aldo Spoldi (1950), will be discussed in the following sections.

3.3.1 Marcello Jori

Marcello Jori (1951) has always been some sort of a Renaissance artist, with many and equally important talents. It would be impossible to classify him: painter, photographer, cartoonist, novelist, sculptor, designer, and even musician. Jori’s oeuvre has been mirroring the chameleon nature of his talent.

Thinking, not without some irony, of a great contemporary master like Gerhard Richter (1932), Jori affirmed that this multifaceted style was a strength of his art.¹⁶⁰

Jori started his artistic career very early; between 1967 and 1970 he painted a series of small watercolours on paper, representing either landscapes or geometric perspectives. These works were deeply influenced by Paul Klee, who was a constant reference point during Jori’s whole artistic life. Interestingly, these works had few, vague colours, unlike most of his later works; colours were still banned in those years. These watercolours were perceived almost as monochromes; they were also questioning the traditional

¹⁵⁹ Barilli 2003 (cf. note 156), p. 19.

¹⁶⁰ Hapkemeyer 1991 Andreas Hapkemeyer, *Marcello Joris Magische Geometrien*, in: *Marcello Jori*; Bolzano, Museum of Modern Art, 1991, p. 12.

dichotomy between figurative and non-figurative art that always is not so clearly separated in Jori's work.



Figure 66 Marcello Jori, *Sunset on Sunset*, 1975, 23 photography 56.5 x 102.5 cm, Actual location not specified.

In 1972 Jori moved to Bologna to study at DAMS and in the Emilian city he had his first solo exhibition in 1977. In this period, he had developed new works fully belonging to the dominant Conceptual art. A very fruitful trend that was starting in those days was what Barilli called 'Different repetition': some young artists were quoting works produced by their predecessors, while introducing elements with a different and unexpected approach.

Jori played the card of taking the paintings of the past 'literally', placing them in the physical conditions they portrayed in their illusory dimension (atmospheric and seasonal conditions, for example). A seascape would be literally immersed in seawater, a sunset literally placed in the dying rays of the sun, and so on (fig. 66).¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ Barilli 2000 Renato Barilli, *Marcello Jori*, ed. by Danilo Eccher; Turin, Hopefulmonster, 2000, p. 100.



Figure 67 Marcello Jori, *Ophelia*, 1976, 23 photographs 20 x 30 cm each, Bologna, Private collection.

These works were wonderfully described by great Austrian artist Hermann Nitsch (1938):¹⁶²

He [Jori] created extremely poetical happenings which won me over for their uniqueness and superlative formal quality.

He had placed a full-size reproduction of the drowned Ophelia by the Pre-Raphaelite painter Millais in the stagnant waters of a river flanked by reeds [(fig. 67)]. [...] Then, in Sardinia, at the middle of the night he projected Insula dulcamara, a painting by Klee, from a boat in the sea onto a cliff, making it a real island [(fig. 68)]. [...] All the events were naturally recorded as photographs.

The most consistent of these works was of a musical nature. He went to former Czechoslovakia and, with a team of sound engineers, he recorded the real noises of the Moldau River and the surrounding environment, from the source

¹⁶² Marcello Jori and Hermann Nitsch had met each other in Bologna in 1977, at Nitsch's fifty-fifth happening in the church of Santa Lucia, and they became great friends.

to the mouth. These sounds were then reproduced on a disc together with the Moldau Symphony by Friedrich Smetana.¹⁶³



Figure 68 Marcello Jori, *Insula dulcamara* (detail), 1976, 19 photographs 94 x 114.5 cm, Milan, Galleria Bianconi.

Jori had also started a parallel career as a cartoonist in 1977; later in Bologna he founded with some friends a group called *Valvoline* that revolutionized comics. In the past there were eminent examples of great artists drawing comics: Lyonel Feininger was the most prominent one and Jori had to have known his work very well.¹⁶⁴ Nevertheless, this activity has always been seen as something suspicious by art critics, almost a *diminutio* for an artist. Jori was probably taken less seriously because of that. His first comic was *Minus*, a cruel wordless comic strip drawn in a very minimal and apparently childish style, clearly influenced, once again, by Paul Klee (fig. 69). In 1985 Jori

¹⁶³ Nitsch 2000 Hermann Nitsch, *Marcello Jori*, ed. by Danilo Eccher; Turin, Hopefulmonster, 2000, p. 111.

¹⁶⁴ Lyonel Feiniger (1871 – 1956) was a German-American painter. Grown-up in New York City, he was the master artist in charge of the printmaking workshop at Walter Gropius' Bauhaus in 1919, before going back to the U.S. after being included in the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition in 1936. He created *The Kin-der-Kids* and *Wee Willie Winkie's World*, two early newspaper comics published by the Chicago Sunday Tribune in 1906-07. These comics occupied a full-page and were rendered in colour.

published another important comic book, *Lover*, where he adopted a realist, almost socialist style (fig. 70).¹⁶⁵

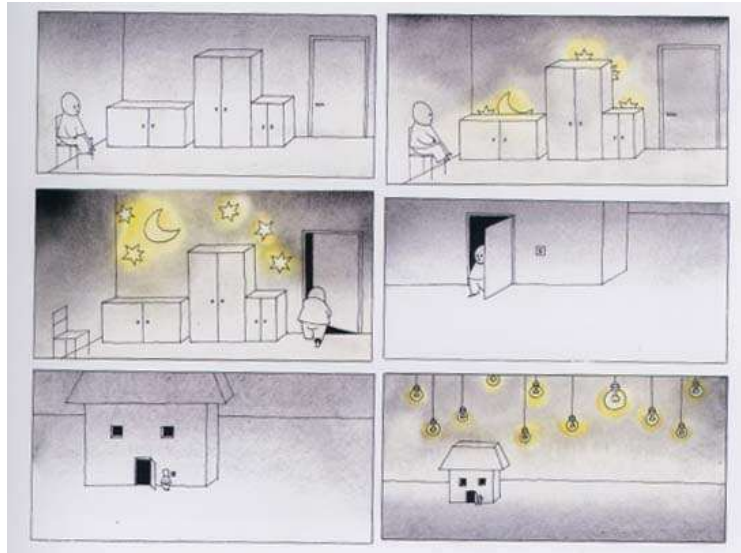


Figure 69 Marcello Jori, *Minus*, 1977.

Figure 70 Marcello Jori, *Lover*, 1985.



¹⁶⁵ Commenting on the style used in *Lover*, Jori said that Valvoline was “a mental attitude, out of time and of the styles of that moment. A group of artists wandering comics, design, architecture and painting.” See Jori 1985 Marcello Jori, *Lover*; Bologna, Coconino Press, 2014, p. 7.

Between the end of 1979 and 1980, when Jori joined the Nuovi-nuovi group, he once again took up painting. Quoting Nitsch again:

His works in that period went in a different direction from mine and those of my contemporaries. They were no longer artistic words that conceived psychoanalysis in a melancholy, expressive and exhibitionist manner. We were still fighting the war, lost or won, of the avant-garde.

The new art had nothing whatsoever to do with informal and minimal art, even though these last ones had taught a lot.

*A new generation had found its own language. Through Jori, a fresh young art began to take root.*¹⁶⁶

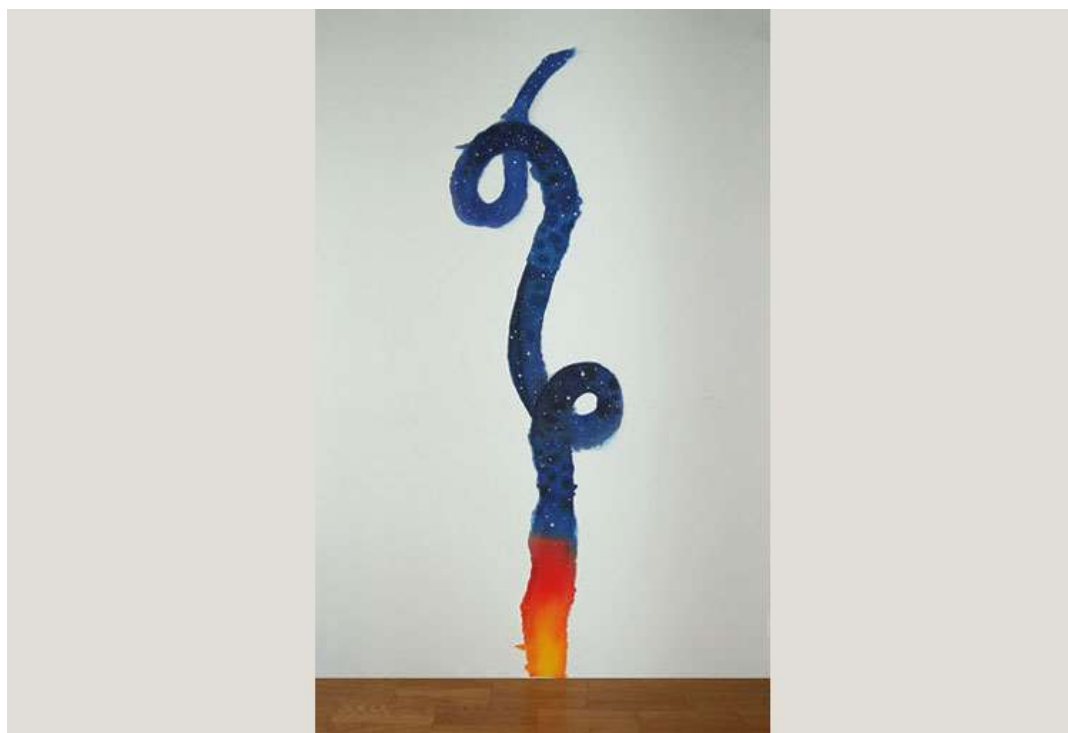


Figure 71 Marcello Jori, *La caduta dell'angelo* (*The Fall of the Angel*), 1979, Acrylic and watercolours on shaped canvas, 195 x 40 cm, Actual location not specified.

The work that marked this passage back to painting was *The Fall of the Angel* (fig. 71), exhibited in Turin in 1979. From that point onwards Jori would never abandon painting again. This artwork showed all the elements that would

¹⁶⁶ Nitsch 2000 (cf. note 163), p. 111.

characterize his research over the following years: wonderful colours, lyricism, pleasantness, narration and handmade quality. The subsequent works were similarly shaped stripes of canvas or paper, beautifully coloured, reporting long, unreadable narrations (fig. 72). These works full of poetry had some connections to a stream of Conceptual art that had been very active in Italy, Visual Poetry.¹⁶⁷



Figure 72 Marcello Jori, *Di nuovo in sintonia con il cosmo (In Tune with the Cosmos Again)*, 1980, Acrylic and watercolours on shaped canvas, Dimensions and actual location not specified.

Between 1980 and 1982, Jori enclosed fragments of fragile water coloured paper in boxes, creating theatrical spaces that he in fact called *Teatrini* (Little Theatres). Lucio Fontana (1899–1968) had before produced a series of works with the same title. Especially in Italy, such a reference could be neither casual nor ignored. Comparing the two series (fig. 73 and fig. 74), the differences were quite obvious. Fontana employed rigid, solid and very refined materials,

¹⁶⁷ Renato Barilli and Achille Bonito Oliva themselves had both taken part in *Gruppo 63*, which developed its research also in Visual Poetry.

whereas Jori used very light, almost immaterial papers that were cut irregularly. Fontana's works were either monochromes or bicolour; Jori's were a feast of colours, where blue and red prevailed in a way recalling the sky and the hell of the falling angel of his previous work.



Figure 73 Lucio Fontana, *Teatrino (Little Theatre)*, 1968, Multiple on paperboard, 70 x 70 cm, Edition Plus, Baden - Baden, 1968 Archivio fondazione Lucio Fontana.



Figure 74 Marcello Jori, *Teatrino (Little Theatre)*, 1981-83, Gouache on paperboard, 72 x 55 cm, Turin, Author's collection.

Invited by Luciano Caramel (1935), in 1982 Jori had a personal room at the Italian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, where he exhibited four large works. One of them, entitled *Palazzi* (Buildings) started a new series of works, where geometrical forms composed landscapes and imaginary cities on the canvas. Other series exploring as many themes were *Gioie* (Jewels), *Cristalli* (Crystals), *Forzieri* (Coffers) and *Regge* (Royal Palaces, fig. 75 and fig. 76). In each of them, Jori unleashed his imagination and creativity to create beautiful, fantasy worlds. With reference to the Crystals, Francesca Alinovi noted:

Crystals' geometry is arbitrary, fantastic and extremely emotional, as once writing was. Jori always starts from an unshaped stain of colour and there he draws freehand angles and lines that meet more by chance than purposely. Crystals, therefore, more various and unpredictable than the ones found in

*nature. The crystals are generated amazingly from embryos with no form and they are there to produce amazing effects on the observers, exciting their desire for possession, just like the ancient, legendary treasures.*¹⁶⁸

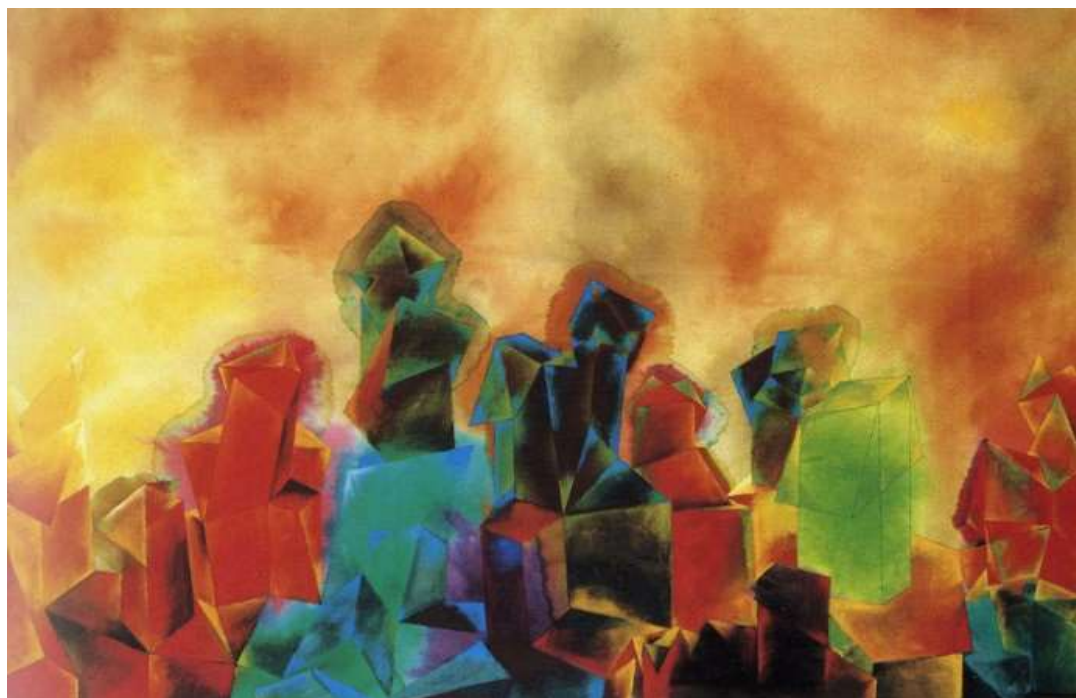


Figure 75 Marcello Jori, *Reggia (Royal Palace)*, 1982, Acrylic and watercolours on canvas, Dimensions not specified; Milan, Fondazione Marconi.

Soon, Jori started mixing and combining all his favourite themes, creating nevertheless a very coherent *corpus* of works, despite his use of different media, including sculpture. All his works had in common a search for beauty, elegance and lightness.

¹⁶⁸ Translated by the author. Quoted in Gualdoni 1989 Flaminio Gualdoni, *Jori*; Milan, Electa, 1989, p. 95.



Figure 76 Marcello Jori, *Il Quartiere della Perla (The Pearl Quartier)*, 1983, Ink and acrylic on canvas, 80 x 120 cm, Actual location not specified.

3.3.2 Aldo Spoldi

Aldo Spoldi had his first solo exhibition in Milan in 1978. As Renato Barilli noticed, his early works could be considered close to a specific tendency of Conceptual art that had been developing in those years: Narrative art.¹⁶⁹ Narrative artists were often using lots of images, usually photos, to compose a unique work, whose narration the beholder had to actively comprehend. The

¹⁶⁹ In particular, the critic referred to the French components of this movement, Christian Boltanski (1944) and Jean Le Gac (1936). See Barilli 1985 Renato Barilli, *Aldo Spoldi. Maestri contemporanei No. 45*; Milan, Vanessa, 1985, p. 3.

dissemination of the images on the wall, their frames and some additional text were in most of the cases more important than the single picture, often portraying insignificant subjects. While these artists were employing an objective and aseptic medium like photography, since the beginning Spoldi made an artisanal choice by using drawing as his preferred mode of expression. Similarly to the majority of conceptual works that had no colours, Spoldi at first used only black and white. The narrative element for his art came from classics of literature, such as *The Pickwick Papers* or *Ubu Roi*.¹⁷⁰



Figure 77 Aldo Spoldi, *Il giro del mondo in 80 giorni* (*Around the World in Eighty Days*), 1979, Pastels on paper, 140 x 270 cm, Milan, Fondazione Marconi.

Spoldi employed a series of frames, in different dimensions and setups, which established their own logic and imposed it on the images. In traditional painting frame used to play the subordinate role of a decorative complement. In Spoldi frames played the role of the director or the lighting technician in show business. They decided on the validity of the poses assumed by the depicted characters, on the narrative sequence of the painting, and on the hierarchy of

¹⁷⁰ *The Pickwick Papers* (1836) is the first novel by Charles Dickens (1812–1870); *Ubu Roi* (1896) is a play by Alfred Jarry (1873–1907).

the different elements of the overall picture. From 1979, Spoldi rediscovered colours, always spread in flat, thin fields (fig. 77).



Figure 78 Aldo Spoldi, *Senza titolo (Untitled)*, 1983, Mixed media on paper and panel, 119 x 59 cm, Gallarate, MAGA – Museo d'Arte Gallarate.

His works, full of irony, were quoting aged images coming from popular or infantile culture, such as comics and advertisements belonging to Belle Époque (fig. 78 and fig. 79). As stated by critic Loredana Parmisani,

His work staged pictorially theatrical or literary texts [...], not in order to illustrate the text, or to accentuate its characteristics from an artistic point of

view, but as an attempt to continue it through painting and to create a new act, a fresh chapter that the text did not contain.¹⁷¹



Figure 79 Aldo Spoldi, *Le avventure di Gordon Pym* (*The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*), 1983, Mixed media on panel, 152 x 110 cm, Turin, Author's collection.

¹⁷¹ Parmesani 2000 Loredana Parmesani, *Aldo Spoldi. Opere dal 1980 al 1994 nella collezione della Banca Commerciale Italiana a Taipei*; Milan, Banca Commerciale Italiana, 2000, p. 57.

On many occasions the artist himself commented on his own work in a series of texts and aphorisms. In a reading at the Centre Georges-Pompidou in 1983, he said:

*I work for a pictorial comedy, not a human one. I have decided to invite the equipment of painting to a party. Stretcher, frame and support come on stage like prima donnas. It is the comedy of painting: the song of the materials of painting invited to a celebration... The brush and the paper, the frame and the colour are something more than mere equipment. They are rather like the inkpot and pen in Andersen's fairy tale: they want to become actors.*¹⁷²

In front of Spoldi's works, the beholder should abandon any speculative attitude and give room to surprise and enchantment. As the artist suggested: "Try and look at my works while chewing a gum, since intelligence is the most dangerous form of stupidity."¹⁷³

At the end of the 1980s, Spoldi started some conceptual operations, concerned with the real world and the economic nature of art and society. He created a company, *Oklahoma S.r.l.*,

*Together with three partners (a lawyer, an accountant and a collector), [...] of which he is the chairman, managing director and art director. [...] As a company [...] it is intended, through its documents such as letters, delivery notes and invoices, to transform work and commercial activity into works of art.*¹⁷⁴

3.4 Non-figurative Artists

Carlo Bonfà (1944) created works full of colours and pleasure for the eye. In those years the Anti-Design movement was emphasizing shocking colours,

¹⁷² Ibid., p. 58.

¹⁷³ Translated by the author, from: Spoldi 1980 Aldo Spoldi, *Aldo Spoldi*, in: *Nuova Immagine. New Image*, ed. by Flavio Caroli; Milan, Mazzotta, 1980, p. 216.

¹⁷⁴ Parmesani 2000 (cf. note 171), p. 61.

scale distortion, and irony; in a similar way Bonfà was creating useless, decorative objects that were almost a parody of modernist design (fig. 80).

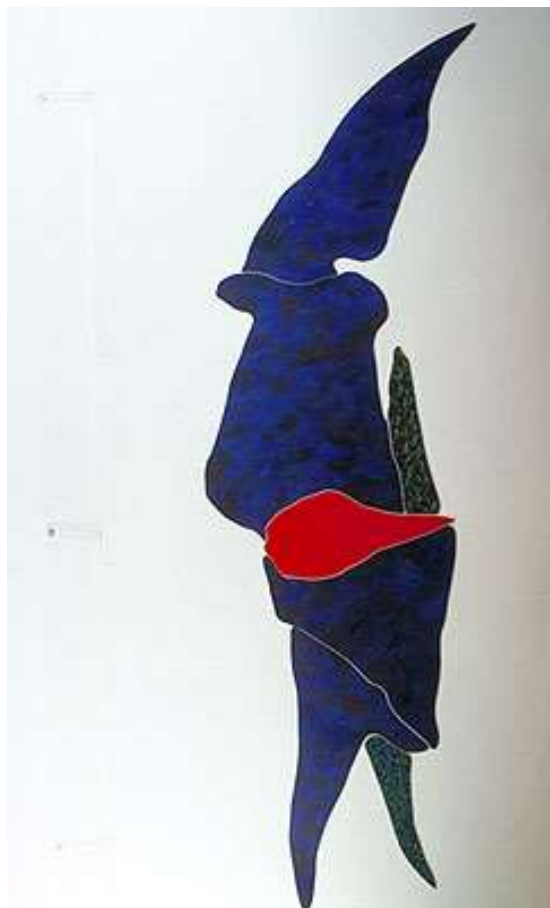


Figure 80 Carlo Bonfà, *Senza titolo (Untitled)*, 1982, Mixed media on panel, 370 x 170 cm, Suzzara, Museo Premio Suzzara.

Vittorio D'Augusta (1937) was eager to experiment; he “has indefatigably investigated the many possibilities of the support”.¹⁷⁵ His abstract research was focusing on themes that were central for the *Pittura Analitica* movement in the 1970s.¹⁷⁶ Also D'Augusta was interested in the materials and in the

¹⁷⁵ Barilli 1995 (cf. note 152), p. 179.

¹⁷⁶ Pittura Analitica (lit. Analytical Painting; an English name for similar tendencies is Fundamental Painting) was a movement (a so-called ‘non-group group’) active in the 1970s. The major artists were Giorgio Griffa (1936), Marco Gastini (1938), Pino Pinelli (1938), Enzo Cacciola (1945), Claudio Olivieri (1934), Claudio Verna (1937), Gianfranco Zappettini (1939). What they had in common was an interest for the process of painting, which they analysed in their works, starting from the basic elements of painting, and through painting. Thus, they developed a metalinguistic discourse (painting used to analyse painting), full of political implication and very conceptual. It was still a typical expression of the 1970s, but it was the first attempt to recuperate painting, even if, unlike what happened in the

process of making an artwork. For this reason, he used to add concrete dust to his colours, obtaining the effect that the movements of hands and tools on the surface of the work were revealed in a permanent trace as soon as the paint got dried (fig. 81).



Figure 81 Vittorio D'Augusta, *Senza titolo (Untitled)*, 1999, Oil on canvas, 200 x 150 cm, Milan, Studio Vigato.

Giuseppe Del Franco (1946) combined in his canvases techniques belonging to action painting with a taste for decoration derived from the Oriental culture.

Giorgio Zucchini (1939) started in the 1970s with installations in which painting played an important role. Gouache was his preferred medium and green the dominant colour of his paintings. Unlike most of his colleagues, he did not

1980s, from a progressive perspective. Similar researches were conducted in other European countries: the groups Supports/Surfaces and BMPT in France, Alan Charlton (1948) in England, Gotthard Graubner (1930–2013) in Germany, Czech-born Tomas Rajlich (1940) in the Netherlands, just to name a few.

explicitly quote artists from the past, but he rather took inspiration directly from nature. Biomorphic shapes could sometimes be recognized in his works, not strictly non-figurative (fig. 82).



Figure 82 Giorgio Zucchini, *Forra (Untitled)*, 1985, Watercolour on canvas, 60 x 60 cm, Bologna, Art Forum.

The two most significant artists in this group, Luciano Bartolini (1940–1994) and Enzo Esposito (1946), will be discussed in the following sections.

3.4.1 Luciano Bartolini

Luciano Bartolini travelled a lot to the Eastern world, especially to India and Nepal. Together with Clemente and Ontani, he was another important Italian artist of the 1980s, whose art was deeply influenced by oriental culture.

If Ontani and Salvo were the link between Nuovi-nuovi and Arte Povera, Luciano Bartolini was the connection between the group and another movement that had characterized the 1970s, marking a return to painting:

Pittura Analitica.¹⁷⁷ Influences of this Italian artistic stream could be found in many works by non-figurative new-new artists, such as D'Augusta or Esposito.

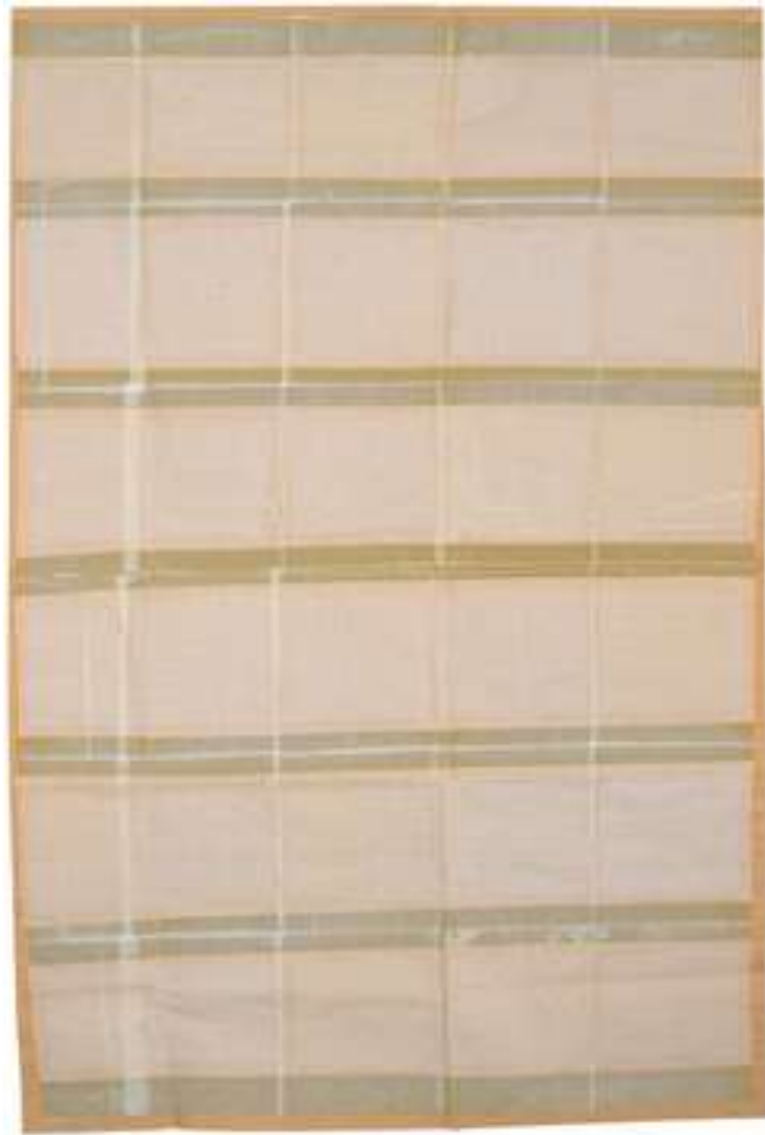


Figure 83 Luciano Bartolini, *Kleenex*, 1974, Brown scotch tape and Kleenexes on brown packing-paper, 150 x 100 cm, Actual location not specified.

From 1973 Bartolini actively participated in exhibitions of Pittura Analitica, focussing on paper, an extremely versatile medium. His works of this period were made of common Kleenexes glued on packing-paper, creating a rhythmic, modular framework (fig. 83). The aspect of the artworks, deprived of

¹⁷⁷ Cf. note 176.

colours, reminded of *Achromes* by Piero Manzoni (1933–1963). The interest for materials was something Bartolini had in common with another major Italian artist, Alberto Burri (1915–1995). The different papers had an ephemeral nature, were foldable and modifiable; they had different grades of transparency or opacity and provided various tactile feelings. Because of their common use, Kleenexes had also a metonymic meaning, referring to visage and skin. 1977 was a turning point for Bartolini, who started introducing in his works photographic images and photocopies referring to his travels. In that year, he exhibited a Kleenex installation at the 14th São Paulo Art Biennial, entitled *Pensando all'Oriente* (Thinking of the Eastern world). The photo accompanying the installation revealed the mimetic evocation of the prayer-kites hanging from the dome of the Buddhist stupa of Boudhanath in Nepal (fig. 84).¹⁷⁸ The raw materials were further achieving transcendent nuances referring to our collective unconscious.

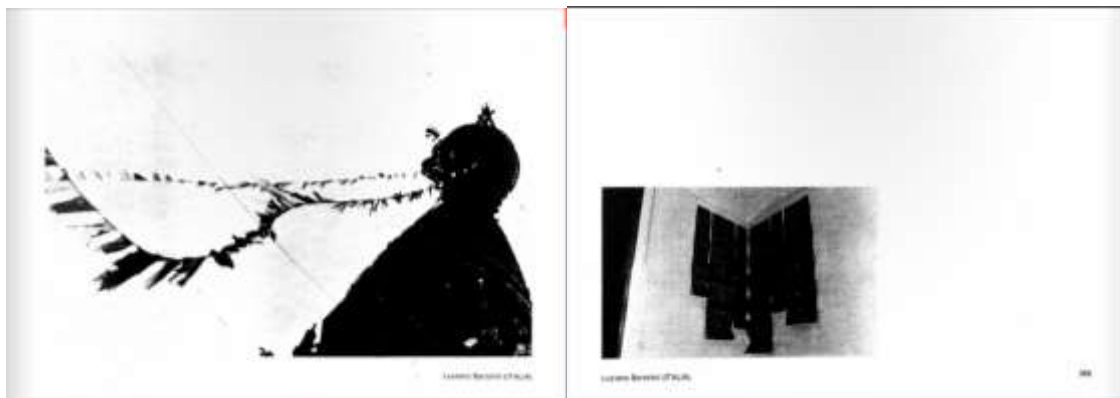


Figure 84 Reproduction of the pages 368 and 369 of the Biennial Catalogue with the images of Bartolini's *Pensando all'Oriente*.

In 1978 Bartolini had a solo show at Paul Maenz Gallery in Cologne. In the work *Moschea della Perla* (The Pearl Mosque), the close-up photos of the real building taken in Delhi acted as an extension of the strip of Kleenexes hanging on the wall, with the pattern of the real floor of the mosque echoing the one

¹⁷⁸ In 1979 Boudhanath was nominated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is one of the most popular tourist sites in the Kathmandu area.

created by the tissue papers.¹⁷⁹ The work played with dichotomies between thought and experience, memory and reality (fig. 85).



Figure 85 Luciano Bartolini, *Moschea della Perla* (*The Pearl Mosque*), 1978, Kleenexes on packing-paper (220 x 45 cm) and photocopies in gilded frames (23 x 31 cm each), Cologne, Paul Maenz Collection.

In another work, *Le ombre della Fortezza di Jodhpur* (*The Shadows of Mehrangarh Fort*), Bartolini occupied the upper corner of a room with Kleenexes arranged in triangular shapes, in order to reproduce similar images designed by the shadows that he had observed during a visit to the Indian fort.¹⁸⁰ The motif of shadow was of primary importance for Bartolini, not as a physical phenomenon, but as a metaphor for the trace of a historical event

¹⁷⁹ The Hindustani name is Moti Masjid. It is a white marble mosque inside the Red Fort complex in Delhi. It was built between 1659 and 1660.

¹⁸⁰ The Mehrangarh Fort, located in Jodhpur, is one of the largest forts in India. Although its construction started in 1459, the building belongs mainly to the 17th century.

evoked in memories and dreams. This was also the theme of the installation that he presented at the Venice Biennale in 1980, invited by Italian Commissioner Vittorio Fagone (1933). It was the famous edition that hosted, for the first time, Transavantgarde, but Bartolini was still exhibiting with some colleagues of Pittura Analitica in an artistic context belonging to the 1970s (fig. 86).



Figure 86 Luciano Bartolini, *Perciò nelle strade della notte perdurano gli ori della tua ombra (Thus in the Streets in the Night Persists the Gold of your Shadow)*, 1980, Installation at the Venice Biennale.

Myth became the main object of his art, especially Greek mythology, seen as the common archetype shared by all the Mediterranean peoples. At the same time, the artist rediscovered painting and the Oriental taste for decoration; after having abandoned his early minimalistic style, Bartolini began to produce works of incomparable beauty and intense lyricism. Therefore, the artist introduced in his works a series of symbols, referring to mythology, philosophy and to his travels. An important source of symbolic elements was the myth of

the Minotaur.¹⁸¹ Probably representing an ancient solar deity, the Minotaur was the subject of many interpretations by many artists and poets throughout the centuries.



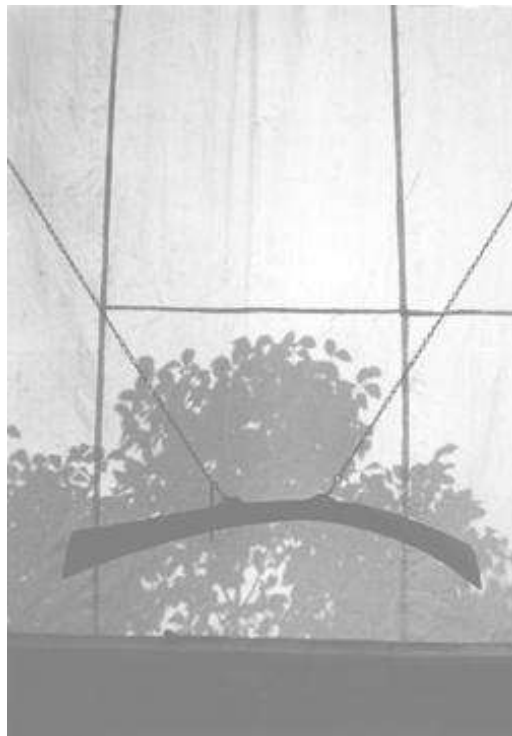
Figure 87 Luciano Bartolini, *Le (double) jardin de A.*, 1980, Mixed media and collage on paper, 44.5 x 54 cm, Turin, Author's collection.

One of the most recent versions of this character was given by Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) in his 1949 short story *The House of Asterion*. Asterion was in fact the real name of the monster. According to Borges' vision, there was actually no monster, just a unique individual looking for an identity

¹⁸¹ In Greek mythology, the Minotaur was the son of Pasiphae, wife of King Minos of Crete. Queen Pasiphae slept with a bull sent by Zeus, and gave birth to a creature part man – part bull. Although embarrassed, King Minos did not want to kill the Minotaur, so he hid the monster in the Labyrinth built by Daedalus at the Minoan Palace of Knossos. Later, Aegeus' son Theseus killed the Minotaur and was able to exit the Labyrinth, thanks to the thread that Princess Ariadne, daughter of King Minos, had given to him.

and for the meaning of life.¹⁸² The name Asterion came from the Greek *Ἀστέριος*, ‘starry’, and Bartolini referred to this meaning when in some works he illustrated gilded orbits of stars. Another protagonist of the same myth was present in many of Bartolini’s works: Ariadne. Almost a lunar deity, her name came from the Greek *Ἀριάδνη*, ‘chaste’, but had an assonance with Arachne, the name of a legendary weaver. These two mythological figures, who had the thread in common, were made into one and synthetized by Bartolini in a spider, represented at the centre of the web. The spider’s web, corresponding to Daedalus’ Labyrinth, was the symbol for human introspection.

Figure 88 Gong at Monastery of Vatopedi on Mount Athos (Greece) photographed by Bartolini.



After a summer spent on the Greek island of Santorini, Bartolini also visited the myth of Atlantis.¹⁸³ He represented it through circular symbols or curving

¹⁸² In the short story, Asterion was indeed eagerly waiting for his “redeemer” Theseus, who, by killing him, will take him away from the Labyrinth. The story ends with Theseus words to Ariadne: “Would you believe it, Ariadne? The Minotaur scarcely defended himself.” See Borges 1949 Jorge Luis Borges, *The Aleph and Other Stories*; London, Penguin Classics, 2004, p. 51–53.

¹⁸³ Plato (428/427–348/347 BCE) introduced the fictional island of Atlantis in his works *Timaeus* and *Critias*. At the end, the island submerged into the Ocean.

arabesque, employing gold leaf (fig. 87).¹⁸⁴ For the massive use of this technique some critics correlated Bartolini and Vienna Jugendstil.¹⁸⁵

From 1982, Bartolini introduced another element that had struck him during his travels: a twice arched gong seen in the Monastery of Vatopedi on Mount Athos (fig. 88).¹⁸⁶ Bartolini was trying to reproduce sounds through painting; in 1983 he was in Berlin following a DAAD Program and the works produced there were exploring this theme.¹⁸⁷ The series *Klang-Bilder* displayed various positions of the gong's swing and the symbol used for it was recalling the spider motif connected to Ariadne (fig. 89).



Figure 89 Luciano Bartolini, *Berliner Klang*, 1978, Acrylic on paper, 130 x 230 cm, Actual location not specified.

In 1983 the research on sounds and music brought Bartolini to add a further topic in his works: dance. This time, the artist had been struck by the

¹⁸⁴ For a broader analysis of the symbols used by Bartolini referring to Atlantis, see for instance Toni Stoos' essay *Shiva dancing in Berlin*, in: Del Guercio/Stoos/Tazzi 1986 *Luciano Bartolini*, ed. by Andrea B. Del Guercio, Toni Stoos and Pier Luigi Tazzi; Ravenna, Agenzia Editoriale Esseggi, 1986, p. 24–25.

¹⁸⁵ See, for instance, Barilli 2006 (cf. note 99), p. 61.

¹⁸⁶ The Holy and Great Monastery of Vatopedi on Mount Athos, Greece, was built during the 10th century.

¹⁸⁷ DAAD is the acronym for Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst, the German Academic Exchange Service.

extraordinary *Sketch of dancer*, a limestone painted around 1200 BCE in Egypt now in the collection of the Museo Egizio in Turin (fig. 90).



Figure 90 *Egyptian dancer*, New Kingdom, Dynasty XIX (about 1200 BCE), limestone, 10.5 x 16.8 cm, Turin, Egyptian Museum.

Bartolini quoted the ancient artwork by sketching the movements of the depicted dancer, in a non-figurative style close to action painting. And again, all his symbols recalled and mirrored one another: the spider, the gong, the dancer (fig. 91). Such elements, recognizable to connoisseurs of Bartolini's work, were mixed together and almost concealed in paintings that remained, at the end, non-figurative. As noted by Daolio, "from the mid-eighties to the time of his premature death, Bartolini's attention turns to extending and embracing a vision of cosmic character that brings him even closer to a sacral dimension."¹⁸⁸ In this period Bartolini developed a mystic, universal theme: the tree connecting the chthonic world of its roots and the sky of its foliage (fig. 92).

¹⁸⁸ Daolio 2000 Roberto Daolio, *Luciano Bartolini. More than this*; Milan, Charta, 2000, p. 18.



Figure 91 Luciano Bartolini, *A la limite, Shiva dancing in Berlin*, 1983, Mixed media on paper, 130 x 170 cm, Actual location not specified.

According to tradition, the tree is a symbol for the cosmos.¹⁸⁹ That was the reason why this series of works were called *Kosmische Visionen*.¹⁹⁰

Bartolini was a magnificent artist, whose importance in non-figurative art was comparable to Ontani's and Salvo's in figurative art. Unfortunately, he passed away too early.

¹⁸⁹ Further details are provided by Bruno Bandini in Daolio/Bandini 1988 Roberto Daolio and Bruno Bandini, *Luciano Bartolini (Beyond)*; Ravenna, Edizioni Essegi, 1988, p. 11.

¹⁹⁰ In this series there were both very big and little, intimate works. To the latter category belong the wonderful twenty-one watercolours (15x20 cm, each) that were almost scratch pad notes taken by the artist (fig. 93). The most comprehensive catalogue on these works is Friedel 1987 Helmut Friedel, *Luciano Bartolini. Kosmische Visionen*; Brescia, Edizioni Nuovi Strumenti, 1987.



Figure 92 Luciano Bartolini, *Foresta interiore (Inner Forest)*, 1988, Mixed media on packing-paper, Installation (part.), Actual location not specified.



Figure 93 Luciano Bartolini, *Kosmiche Visionen*, 1985, Watercolour on paper, 15 x 19.2 cm, Turin, Author's collection.

3.4.2 Enzo Esposito

Enzo Esposito was born in Campania, where he completed his art studies and started exhibiting in the same galleries frequented by Mimmo Paladino, who was also taking his first steps as an artist.¹⁹¹ In the early 1970s, Esposito was perfectly tuned in with the contemporary mood: his works were very conceptual and painting was banned. In his first solo exhibitions held in Caserta between 1970 and 1971, he presented a series of objects and tools that reminded of surgical operations: scalpels, syringes, cotton in crystal jars.¹⁹² At a closer look, these devices turned out to be hand-made reproductions, rather than ready-mades, as from a first superficial glance they could be erroneously assimilated. They were some kind of prototypes, with slight differences from the original models that made them unusable for surgery (fig. 94).



Figure 94 Enzo Esposito, *S.T. (Untitled)*, 1972, 45 x 35 cm, Steel object, Actual location not specified.

¹⁹¹ Together, Esposito and Paladino founded some kind of fanzine called *Proposta* (Proposal), which animated the Neapolitan cultural debate, involving many intellectuals, including Achille Bonito Oliva.

¹⁹² The exhibition is described, for instance, in Fiz 2006 Alberto Fiz, *Enzo Esposito. La traccia invisibile del reale*; Florence, Maschietto Editore, 2006, p. 12.

As noted by critic Filiberto Menna (1926–1988):

*The resulting work assumes a series of metaphoric meanings which refer to a universe characterized by cruelty and violence: the more the tools are cold and aseptic, the more we feel the threat they represent. [...] Esposito's works acquire a strong, emblematic value, becoming symbols of a terrified soul that is the typical soul of our times, forced every day to face violence and aggression.*¹⁹³



Figure 95 Enzo Esposito, *S.T. (Untitled)*, 1973, 50 x 35 cm, Retouched photo, cotton, metallic object and pencil on paper, Actual location not specified.

In the following years, Esposito employed the photo camera to portray human bodies and daggers (fig. 95), in a meditation on lacerations and wounds that was probably indebted to Vienna Actionism, namely that of Arnulf Rainer (1929).¹⁹⁴ Being dissatisfied with the photographic medium, because in his

¹⁹³ Article by Filiberto Menna, entitled: *Enzo Esposito*, translated by the author. First published in Naples, *Il Mattino*, 07.12.1971; re-published in Fiz 2006 (cf. note 192), p. 70.

¹⁹⁴ Bataille's works were among Esposito's preferred readings and some of these symbolic elements could also be referred to the magazine *Acéphale* created by George Bataille. In the cover of its first issue, drawn by André Masson in 1936, a headless man with a dagger in his hand (inspired by Da Vinci's

opinion an artist was too subordinate to it, Esposito soon abandoned this technique. In 1976, he moved to Milan, where he developed a completely new style, based on painting. Esposito started trying some wall-paintings, deciding on a reduction of his intervention, compared to the large available surface. In repeating the motif of the daggers from his preceding works, reiterated along the wall and reverberated by pieces of glass, Esposito chose a minimalistic style that critic Alberto Fiz linked to American seminal artist Cy Twombly (1928–2011), but that was likely closer to Italian Marco Gastini (1938).¹⁹⁵

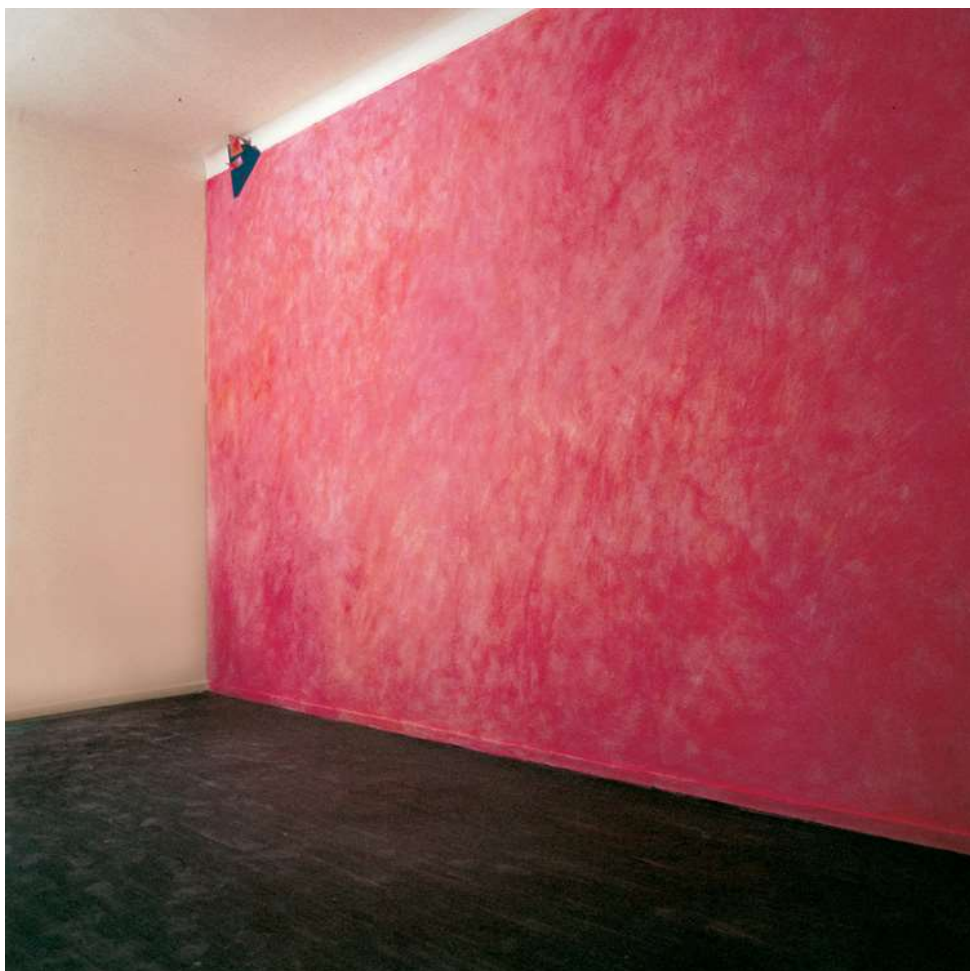


Figure 96 Enzo Esposito, *Ambiente (Space)*, 1979, Fluorescent paint on wall, Milan, “*Pittura-Ambiente*” Exhibition, Royal Palace.

Vitruvian Man) symbolized the aspiration of this group of French intellectuals for a kind of knowledge not ruled by reason. This interpretation of Esposito’s works was suggested by one of his gallerist and can be found in the website of the gallery: MandelliArte 2015 MandelliArte, web page, 2014, <http://www.mandelliarte.com/>, last access 23.02.15.

¹⁹⁵ Fiz 2006 (cf. note 192), p. 13.

In 1979 Esposito was one of the artists selected by curators Renato Barilli and Francesca Alinovi for the exhibition hosted at the Royal Palace, *Pittura-Ambiente*. In his room, Esposito opted for a fluorescent red-painted wall where he applied a piece of glass to obtain “a perfect equilibrium between physical and conceptual values, between cold and warm, artificial and natural” (fig. 96).¹⁹⁶ With his timely adoption of painting and colours, Esposito was ready to join the Nuovi-nuovi group. Actually, together with his new-new companions Vittorio D’Augusta and Giorgio Zucchini, his works were excluded from the first group exhibition in Bologna, because they had been protagonists of the event discussed above in Milan, just a few months before; however, Barilli included the three artists in the essay written for the catalogue.¹⁹⁷ Indeed Esposito had several works presented in the exhibition organized in Genoa at the end of 1982. During the elapsed time, his style had had an evolution towards a richer use of colours, lines and decorative elements, clearly influenced by Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944). Barilli noted: “[A] Few years ago Duchamp and his most appreciated followers ruled [...], whereas in that moment Kandinsky was returning to the spotlight; a master of pictorial emotions, including some ‘easy’ decorative solutions.”¹⁹⁸ Esposito was likely fascinated by the studies conducted by the Russian master on the possibility of breaking painting free from the two-dimensional surface. If the theatrical performances theorized by Kandinsky were never staged when the artist was still alive, some productions of them were realized in these years.¹⁹⁹ Esposito’s research was moving along this direction: painting for three dimensions (fig. 97). At the same time, he was using the new industrial colours to shock the observer. “I use impossible colours that do not exist in nature – electric, acid, distorting and psychedelic colours.”²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁶ Barilli 1985 Renato Barilli, *Enzo Esposito. Maestri contemporanei No. 43*; Milan, Vanessa, 1985, p. 3.

¹⁹⁷ Barilli 1980 (cf. note 104), p. 13–14.

¹⁹⁸ Translated by the author from: Barilli 1985 (cf. note 196), p. 4.

¹⁹⁹ *Der Gelbe Klang (The Yellow Sound)* had its world premiere on 12 May 1972 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. In 1976 the show was produced in Paris.

²⁰⁰ Fiz 2006 (cf. note 192), p. 38.



Figure 97 Enzo Esposito, *S.T. (Untitled)*, 1980, Acrylic on canvas and glass, 320 x 550 cm, Milan, Luciano Inga-Pin Gallery.

Around 1984, Esposito started voiding his works, by reducing signs and colours, but at the same time emphasizing the gesture. Somehow, Esposito was wrapping up the motifs of his early, conceptual works by using the re-discovered medium of painting. Violence and lacerations, themes suggested by the surgical tools or by the dagger of such works were now conveyed by the brush and the colours. In every work a motif appeared, something like a door, sketched in a simple way, resuming the idea of laceration (fig. 98). As Esposito said: “It is an ideal gateway. Do not ask me to what.”²⁰¹ A threshold, a laceration, an idea of limits to be crossed that in Italy had an immediate

²⁰¹ Article by Maurizio Sciacaluga, entitled: *Esposito – Odissea nello spazio*, translated by the author. First published in *Arte*, November 2001; re-published in *Fiz* 2006 (cf. note 192), p. 96–97.

reference to Lucio Fontana and his *Tagli*. Actually, the works had an appearance closer to Abstract Expressionism; some artists could be specifically named: Mark Rothko (1903–1970) or Franz Kline (1910–1962).



Figure 98 Enzo Esposito, *S.T. (Untitled)*, 1987, Mixed media on canvas, 200 x 300 cm, Actual location not specified.

Esposito, again perfectly tuned in with this decade characterized by citations and appropriations, was differently repeating some manners of the 1950s. But thirty years had not passed in vain. As already stated, the colours were of course very different from the ones employed by Fontana or by The Irascibles. Oversimplifying, Art Informel was a by-product of WWII, strong political ideals and, in Europe, existentialism. All these elements were far away and forgotten in the 1980s. In front of a canvas, the attitude of the disengaged artist of the 1980s was completely different from the action painter who in the 1950s had to take out some anger and express something deep inside. Esposito was not painting his own personal feelings or frustrations, but he was rather interested in the relationship between the painting, the room and the beholder.



Figure 99 Enzo Esposito, *S.T. (Untitled)*, 1989, Mixed media on canvas and wood, 200 x 191 cm, Actual location not specified.

And the canvas per se was never enough to contain the painting. Esposito used to attach additional elements, further surfaces; his painting was invading the space and embracing the beholder (fig. 99). From an aesthetic point of view, these works were very close to a famous series, *I Plurimi*, painted by one of the best-known Italian informal artists, Emilio Vedova (1919–2006). Both Vedova and Esposito were referring to a common tradition coming from Ancient Masters: the multi-panel polyptych. Vedova gave a political title to his

1962 work now in the GNAM collection in Rome (fig. 100).²⁰² Esposito wanted no titles for his works: “Giving a title is like defining a border. I do not accept that.”²⁰³



Figure 100 Emilio Vedova, *Plurimo 1 Le mani addosso (Multiple 1 Lay hands)*, 1962, Acrylic on wooden elements, hinges and nails, 217 x 390 x 186 cm, Rome, GNAM.

²⁰² For a description of this Vedova's work, see Frezzotti/Italiano/Rorro 2009, *Galleria Nazionale D'Arte Moderna & MAXXI. Le collezioni 1958–2008*, ed. by Stefania Frezzotti, Carolina Italiano and Angelandreina Rorro; Milan, Mondadori Electa, 2009, vol. 2, p. 659.

²⁰³ Article by Lisa Licitra Ponti, entitled: *Milano: colloquio con Enzo Esposito*, translated by the author. First published in Milan, *Domus*, September 1984; re-published in Fiz 2006 (cf. note 192), p. 80.

With reference to the dynamic structure of Esposito's works, with their vertical and horizontal elements, French writer and art critic Catherine Millet (1948) observed that the different layers are not prioritized, there is no hierarchy: "Our eyes do not penetrate these layers neither following a succession, nor progressively, but simultaneously."²⁰⁴

3.5 Towards the Third Dimension

This sub-group of artists within Nuovi-nuovi was the confirmation that painting was not the only medium allowed.

Vittorio Messina (1946) was likely the most heterogeneous artist in the whole bunch. He expressed himself through architectural installations that combined together prefabricated elements, raw stone, neon, and iron grids. The spaces created by juxtaposing these materials, which Messina often called *Cells*, gave an idea of a suspension of time. There were few points of contact with other new-new artists, maybe a post-modern use, with no hierarchy, of every kind of material and a tendency of quoting architectural elements of the past like columns (fig. 101).

The other two artists that extensively worked in the third dimension, Luigi Mainolfi (1948) and Giuseppe Maraniello (1945), were the most important Italian sculptors of their generation.

Giuseppe Maraniello employed both painting and sculpture as complementary elements of his works. He said in 1979:

The objects I produce – canvases, objets trouvés, modified objects, etc. – have got per se their own meaning, but they can also live combined together and this happens just for an exhibition. Let me explain: I never know what I am going to exhibit before a show, because the materials I have were never produced for a given space, but every time they are adapted to the room. For

²⁰⁴ Fiz 2006 (cf. note 192), p. 42.

this reason, the inclusion of an element rather than another one is entirely accidental.²⁰⁵



Figure 101 Vittorio Messina, *Cella quadrata (Squared cell)*, 1985, Installation, Rome, Artis's collection.

In many works, Maraniello painted monochromatic fields as a backdrop for his little characters in clay, wood or wax (fig. 102). They were minute animals, tiny devils or soldiers, all modelled in a primordial style. Barilli wrote: "Which and how many of the ethnographic and anthropologic museums are evoked by these figures? Visit the Etruscan, Mycenaean-Cretan, Pelasgic, Sardinian, etc., sections."²⁰⁶

Luigi Mainolfi began his artistic itinerary with some performances in front of a public audience. Unlike the majority of the contemporary artistic performances,

²⁰⁵ Interview with Giuseppe Maraniello published by Luciano Inga-Pin in *Gala International* n. 91, April 1979. Republished in: Maraniello 1984 Giuseppe Maraniello, *La casa dal tetto verde*; Brescia, Edizioni Nuovi Strumenti, 1984, p. 85.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. X.

they were not recorded by technological media but attested by a very old and classical medium: plaster casts of the body of the artist/performer.



Figure 102 Giuseppe Maraniello, *Capriccio (Caprice)*, 1980, Gold leafing on wood, wax and iron, 200 x 460 cm, Actual location not specified.

With this choice, Mainolfi proved to be more interested in looking backward than forward. Soon these plaster casts ended up being broken in many pieces, first lying on the floor, than hanging on the walls. The artist abandoned the performances and devoted himself to the production of artworks, preferably in terra-cotta. From 1980 Mainolfi had been producing landscapes with an enchanted touch, manipulating his natural materials to create human or animal forms alluding to a primordial, mythical dimension (fig. 103).

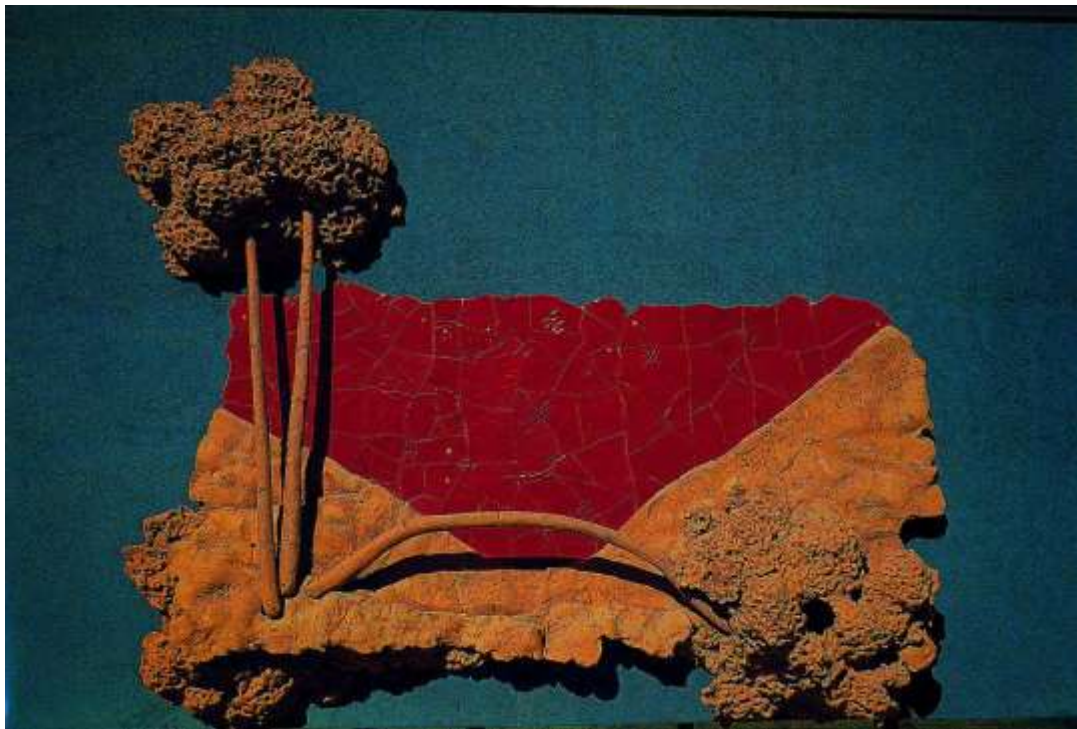


Figure 103 Luigi Mainolfi, *Alle Forche Caudine (At the Caudine Forks)*, 1981, Terra-cotta and ceramic, 350 x 410 x 57 cm, Turin, De Fornaris Foundation.

4. Anachronists

After Ontani and Salvo, a third pioneer decided in the mid-1970s to adopt painting again: Carlo Maria Mariani (1931).

His painting takes inspiration from the ideal form of neoclassical beauty. He imitates, repeats, traces it; in some cases, in redoing it, he corrects it. For this reason, since the beginning, critics used the terms 'educated painting', 'anachronism', 'citationism', even if the most appropriate definition was given by Mariani himself: 'Painter as an art historian'.²⁰⁷

The artist was accused of choosing a rear guard position, but actually his intention and approach were deeply conceptual. In front of a work by an old master, Mariani did not want to copy it, but he was trying to become the old master, impersonating him, reproducing his style and technique in order to create a brand new work of such a master (fig. 104). Appropriation would soon become a crucial topic in art; in Mariani there was something very close to a form of appropriation, but it concerned the spirits of the old masters more than the images painted by them. Barilli referred to Mariani's technique as "a problem of resurrecting the ghosts of the past."²⁰⁸ As critic Thomas McEvelley (1939–2013) wrote:

At first glance, Mariani's work – with his neoclassical style shaped by Thorvaldsen, Canova and Ingres [...] – might be seen as an example of [...] quotational art [...]. On closer analysis, however, his work appears to represent a different approach to history. As he had said, for him the point is not so much to recall the past as to be of another time. His relationship with neoclassicism is less an example of quotation than of identification.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁷ Translation of the author. Italian writer Pier Vittorio Tondelli (1955–1991) interviewed Carlo Maria Mariani in 1987; the interview was then collected with other essays of the great writer and published in 1993, after his death. See Tondelli 1993 Pier Vittorio Tondelli, *Un weekend postmoderno*; Milan, Bompiani/RCS Libri, 2014, p. 257.

²⁰⁸ Barilli 2006 (cf. note 99), p. 38.

²⁰⁹ McEvelley 1990 Thomas McEvelley, *Carlo Maria Mariani's Dialogue with History*, in: *Carlo Maria Mariani. A Rebellion for a New Time*; New York, Hirschl & Adler Modern, 1990, p. 4.



Figure 204 Carlo Maria Mariani, *Dionysus*, 1985, Oil on canvas, 150 x 86 cm, Actual location not specified.

The American critic refers here to three champions of Neoclassicism: Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770–1844) was a Danish sculptor; Antonio Canova (1757–1822) was an Italian sculptor and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780–1867) was a French painter.

Mariani himself said:

[...] I used to substitute an artist of the past to complete a work that had been left unfinished or that had never been executed at all. It was the case of my head for Guido Reni's Archangel Michael. Everything was originated by a statement by Winckelmann, for sure disrespectful towards Guido Reni, in which he affirmed that if the head of this angel would have been painted by Mengs, the result would have been much more sublime. In this case, I wanted to do a favour to Winckelmann. I substituted Mengs and I tried to paint this head [...]. Winckelmann would be happy. I made the impossible possible. In this case, I was the picture. Mariani was no longer existing.²¹⁰

Mariani's way was never meant to demonstrate his academic technique and his outstanding pictorial skills; on the contrary, his was a challenge to the contemporary artistic context, where Conceptual art had become the conformist style taught in academies.

Mariani's major work was *La costellazione del Leone* (The Leo Constellation), first exhibited in 1981 in Rome and New York (fig. 105). Mariani adopted a neoclassical style inspired by Mengs' *Parnassus* and by its Raphaelesque composition (fig. 106). In a sort of Arcady, Mariani illustrated what could be called, with reference to the famous fresco by Raphael in the Vatican, a 'School of Rome'. He portrayed some of the artists and intellectuals of the contemporary cultural scene in Rome as mythological characters.²¹¹ Other artists were either portrayed in tunic or evoked by some of their works.²¹² Achille Bonito Oliva was depicted as a Roman Emperor, whose *adlocutio* was ironically transformed by Mariani into a narcissistic gesture of the critic looking at his own portrait. Mariani represented Bonito Oliva between two portraits of

²¹⁰ Translation of the author from: Tondelli 1993 (cf. note 207), p. 260. Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768), a German art historian and archaeologist, was of pivotal importance in the rise of the neoclassical movement in the 19th century. Anton Raphael Mengs (1728–1779) was a German neoclassical painter, who was defined by Winckelmann as "the greatest artist of his own, and perhaps of later times."

²¹¹ Luigi Ontani was portrayed as Ganymede abducted by the eagle; Mario Merz, one of the major artists of Arte Povera, as Hercules; gallerist Enzo Sperone as Apollo.

²¹² For instance, Cy Twombly, Chia, Clemente are easily recognizable, while the presence of Giulio Paolini is evoked through the reproduction of a work of his.

himself in the two main forms of visual arts, sculpture and painting, in so alluding to the fact that the critic was maybe more devoted to his own persona than to Art. All these people were surrounding Mariani, who portrayed himself at the centre of the whole scene.²¹³



Figure 105 Carlo Maria Mariani, *La costellazione del Leone (The Leo Constellation)*, 1981, Oil on canvas, 340 x 450 cm, Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna.

Following his example, a group of artists was gathered, mainly, but not exclusively, by critic Maurizio Calvesi (1927), without finding an agreed name for it, Anachronists being the one most commonly used.²¹⁴ They also were trying to repeat the kind of art present in history books and museums; while most of the contemporary post-modern artists were repeating differently, these painters were repeating tautologically. Using the metaphor of writing a text,

²¹³ For a description of this work by Mariani, see Frezzotti/Italiano/Rorro 2009 (cf. note 202), vol. 2, p. 435.

²¹⁴ Marisa Vescovo, Giuseppe Gatt and Italo Tomassoni were other critics very active in supporting this artistic group. Other possible labels to it were: Citationism, Hyper-mannerism, New Italian Manner.

instead of marking their citations with quotes, the anachronists omitted the quotes. They did not mark a difference from the models taken from the past, but on the contrary they tried to be as compliant as possible to them.



Figure 106 Anton Raphael Mengs, *Parnassus*, 1761, Fresco, 55 x 101 cm, Rome, Villa Albani.

Among the most significant painters in the group, Alberto Abate (1946–2012) produced very arduous works for the taste of the contemporary beholder (fig. 107). Barilli defined his style as “asphyxiating and unbreathable”.²¹⁵ The most interesting artists however were the less derivative ones.

Omar Galliani (1954) looked at Belgian Symbolism, namely at Fernand Khnopff (1858–1921) and Félicien Rops (1833–1898), with a preference for drawing and charcoal.

Roberto Barni (1939) had a curious evolution, from early, pop works, to his mature sculpture, passing through a brief citationist season.

Together with Mariani, the anachronist achieving the most interesting results was Stefano Di Stasio (1948), who adapted his citationism to represent

²¹⁵ Barilli 2006 (cf. note 99), p.53.

contemporary everyday life. Some of his works, with their magical and suspended atmosphere, seemed sometimes to anticipate solutions of Neo Rauch (1960) and the New Leipzig School (fig. 108).



Figure 107 Alberto Abate, *Arcana Homini*, 1986, Oil on canvas, 150 x 135 cm, Actual location not specified.

The group participated in the 1982 and 1984 Venice Biennales, thanks to Calvesi, and had a section at the 1986 Rome Quadriennale, and it progressively lost its momentum afterwards.²¹⁶

²¹⁶ Other anachronists were: Ubaldo Bartolini (1944), Lorenzo Bonechi (1955–1994), the twins Antonio and Tano Brancato (1937), Aurelio Bulzatti (1954), Antonella Cappuccio (1944), Bruno d'Arcevia (1946), Luigi Frappi (1938), Lino Frongia (1958), Paola Gandolfi (1944), Andrea Granchi (1947), Maurizio Ligas (1951), Tommaso Lisanti (1956), Salvatore Marrone (1948), Athos Ongaro (1947), Nino Panarello (1939), Franco Piruca (1937), Massimo Pulini (1958), Alessandro Romano (1944), Antonio Trotta (1937).



Figure 108 Stefano Di Stasio, *Dialogo sotterraneo (Subterranean dialogue)*, 1991, Oil on canvas, 230 x 180 cm, Rome, Private collection.

5. Other groups

One of the apparent contradictions of the decade of the 1980s was that, despite a generally increasing individualism, maybe for the last time in history the major contributions to art were provided by groups of artists. In Italy, such groups were almost in all cases promoted by strong critics, who fought power struggles in order to achieve a cultural hegemony, no matter the existence of real ideological differences. The main groups have already been analysed in the previous chapters; in the following sections some of the residual movements will be recalled, with no pretence of completeness and keeping in mind that the scene was quite magmatic. Often there were overlaps and artists associated with more than one group.²¹⁷ It does not mean that there were no artists performing their personal, individual research on their own.²¹⁸ In general however, their role was less essential.²¹⁹

5.1 *Magico Primario*

Magico Primario (Primary-Magical) was the title of an exhibition curated by critic Flavio Caroli (1945) in 1980 at Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara. He also tried to establish a new artistic movement that assumed the same denomination. The first, Italian nucleus of this group had been the protagonist

²¹⁷ It would be impossible to list all the groups that were created in the 1980s. Many of them had a very short life and no resonance. For instance, the artists of the group of the Abstract Secession promoted in 1986 by critic Giorgio Cortenova (1944–2013) disappeared without a trace. See Cortenova 1986 Giorgio Cortenova, *La secessione astratta degli anni '80. Tra arcaicità e costruzione*; Milan, Mazzotta, 1986.

On the other hand, Studio Azzurro was a very important, but underrated group that was active in electronic art and new technology. It was officially born in 1982, but the most significant artistic contribution was provided in the following decades. Being anyway so eccentric, it was chosen not to deal with it here.

²¹⁸ For instance: Arcangelo (1956), whose citations were not taken from museums but from cave art; Paolo Iacchetti (1953), Italo Bressan (1950), Giorgio Vicentini (1951) and, in the second half of the decade, Sonia Costantini (1956) and Domenico D'Oora (1953) were developing a non-figurative, minimal painting following the ideas of Pittura Analitica.

²¹⁹ The major artists analysed so far, Ontani, Salvo and Mariani were indeed more individuals than part of a group; Barilli and Calvesi used them as pillars to build their constructions.

of the exhibition *Il Nuovo Contesto* (The New Context) at Studio Marconi, in Milan, in 1979.²²⁰ In 1980, Caroli also curated the big exhibition *Nuova Immagine* (New Image) in Milan, a survey of the new generations of both Italian and international artists. According to Caroli,

*It [Primary-Magical] is not a trend: it is an orientation, an aura, a tension of the imaginary, an anthropological condition. It is not a school, it does not want to make proselytes; the school is a constraint, chaining [...], lessons imparted and accepted. The Primary-Magical is a request on the part of the collective unconscious, sensed by some particularly sensitive antennae: by some artists. It is not a trend: it is a Movement, in a movimentistic, anti-bureaucratic, evolutive [...] sense.*²²¹

Caroli's texts were often hermetic and convoluted, but an idea of what he had in mind when theorizing this movement could be understood by reading how he explained its name:

*The primary is the archetype. The art of the primary is the search for archetypes: originary nuclei lost in the prehistory of humanity; symbolic forms deposited in the collective unconscious. [...] The magical is the fascination, the beauty, someone would say the seduction. It is pre-logical evocation of animistic entities: the divinities of art, the protecting principles of the opus.*²²²

The way the artists interpreted the theory developed by Caroli was problematic from the beginning. The critic himself reported that "some 'unfree spirits' objected to the *Magico Primario* exhibition in Ferrara that the work of the artists eluded the theoretical grid of the critic."²²³

The ideas of the critic could be very interesting for scholars, but they were very difficult to understand and practically apply by the artists. One of Caroli's

²²⁰ The artists presented were: Davide Benati (1949), Michele Carone (1952), Roberto Caspani (1951), Valerio Cassano (1949), Omar Galliani (1954), Luigi Giandonato (1949), Marcello Landi (1950), and two new-new artists already discussed in chapter 3, Antonio Faggiano and Aldo Spoldi. See the catalogue of the exhibition Caroli 1979 Flavio Caroli, *Il nuovo contesto*; Milan, Studio Marconi, 1979.

²²¹ Caroli 1981 Flavio Caroli, *Enciclopedia. Il magico primario in europa*; Modena, Comune di Modena, 1981, p. 6–7.

²²² Ibid., p. 7.

²²³ Ibid., p. 18.

ambitions was to get over the practice of quotation of art that he had contributed to promote himself in the previous years. But how this had to be achieved was not so clear. It was not even clear how this new Movement was different from the main groups operating in Italy. As a matter of fact, Primary-Magical had overlappings with Nuovi-nuovi: Faggiano and Spoldi were in the first exhibition in Milan, while Bartolini and Jori were invited in later exhibitions.

The most interesting point of this movement was its international profile. Unlike the other Italian groups, limited to a national participation, Caroli tried to create a European group. The subtitle of the exhibition organized in Modena in 1981 was indeed *Primary-Magical in Europe*.

The British contingent was of primary importance. Tony Cragg (1949), the famous sculptor, who would have received the Turner price in 1988, was still bound by the lessons of Nouveaux Réalistes and was presenting *objets trouvés*, similar to Ontani's *Oggetti pleonastici*. Stephen Cox (1946) had just started his career in Milan, where he had adopted an analytical approach to sculpture, presenting big rectangular plates in traditional materials leaning against the walls. In Modena Cox also displayed smaller, intimate works made of stone, with a primitive allure. Christopher Lebrun (1951), elected President of the Royal Academy in 2011, completed the British team. In his exhibited works, he was clearly looking back to Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901) and Gustave Moreau (1826–1898), in so confirming again that Caroli's intention to move against quotational art had no practical acknowledgement in the show.

There were two, further relevant participants from Europe.²²⁴ The first one was Gérard Garouste (1945), the only champion, who France could deploy in the post-modern battlefield dominated by Transavantgarde and Neue Wilden. The second one was John van't Slot (1949), the Dutch champion.

Having neither a solid and clear theoretical framework, nor strong marketing capabilities, Flavio Caroli soon renounced to carry on the promotion of this movement. Out of the artists already introduced in the chapter dedicated to Nuovi-nuovi, the most interesting Italian artist participating in this short-lived

²²⁴ There was also a Swiss artist: Lucerne-born Marianne Eigenheer (1945).

group was Gianfranco Notargiacomo (1945), who was actually absent from the *New Context* exhibition.



Figure 109 Gianfranco Notargiacomo, *Le nostre divergenze* (*Our divergences*), 1971, Installation at La Tartaruga Gallery re-installed in 2009 at Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome.

As the majority of the artists of his generation, also Notargiacomo had begun with conceptual works, but his installation of 1971 *Le nostre divergenze* (*Our Divergences*) had already given proof of a new approach: the spaces of *La Tartaruga* Gallery in Rome had been invaded by two-hundred little men made of plasticine (fig. 109). The irony and colours present in this work were not so usual in those days. In 1979 Notargiacomo introduced one of the distinctive elements of his art: *Takète*. It was something in between sculpture and painting, influenced by the futuristic representation of velocity (fig. 110). The name was taken from a famous experiment conducted by German psychologist Wolfgang Köhler (1887–1967).²²⁵ In the following years, the artist

²²⁵ In 1929, on the island of Tenerife, Köhler asked a sample of people to associate two words, *Takète* and *Maluma*, to two different forms, one formed by straight lines and sharp edges, the other by soft curves. *Takète* was mostly associated to the former figure, while *Maluma* to the latter. This was due partially to the pungent sound of the word *Takète*, partially to the letters used to spell these words.

chose painting and a neo-informal style, deeply influenced by the pictorial tradition of Rome (fig. 111). His masterworks were the two huge canvases presented at the 1982 Venice Biennale, characterized by a strong energy and dark tones.²²⁶

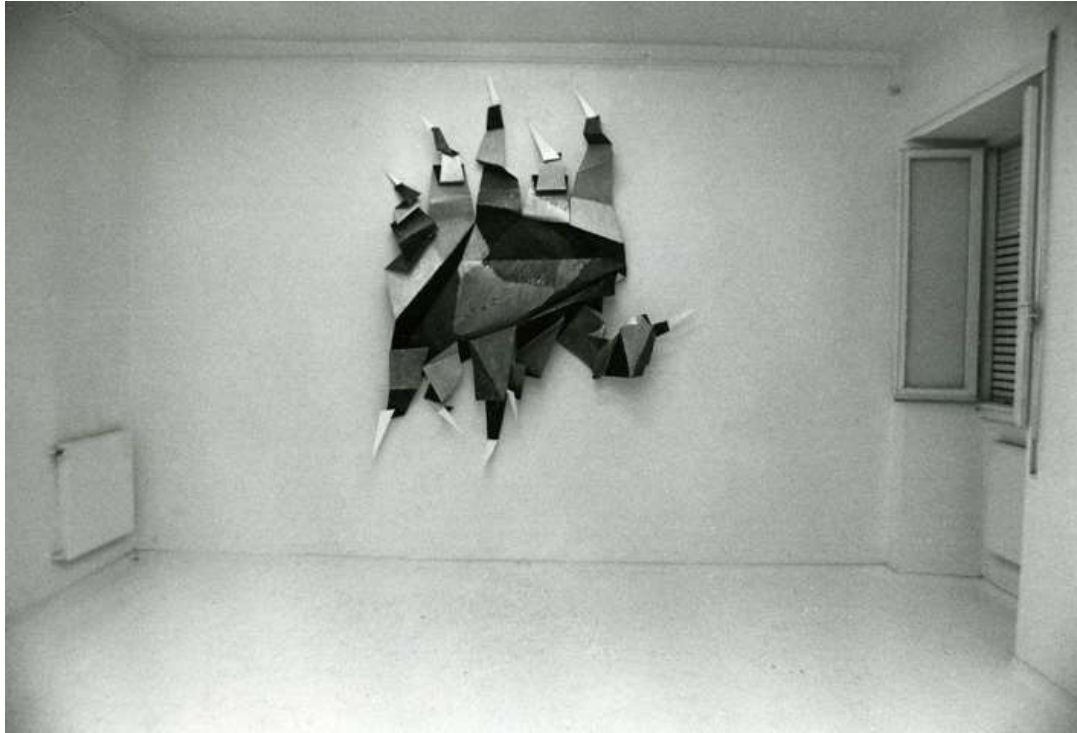


Figure 110 Gianfranco Notargiacomo, *Takéte* exhibition at La Salita Gallery in 1979 in Rome.

5.2 Officina San Lorenzo

Compared to other artistic groups of the 1980s, the novelty of the group Officina San Lorenzo (Workshop San Lorenzo, a district of Rome) was the absence of a critic acting as a mentor. It was only composed of six artists: Bruno Ceccobelli (1952), Gianni Dessì (1955), Giuseppe Gallo (1954), Nunzio Di Stefano (1954), simply known as Nunzio, Piero Pizzi Cannella (1955),

In addition, the letter M of the word *Maluma* could be easily reconnected to the sound of the sweet word *Mom*.

²²⁶ The works presented were *Omaggio a Lorenzo Lotto. Dalla Crocifissione di Monte San Giusto* (Homage to Lorenzo Lotto. After the Crucifixion in Monte San Giusto) and *Nuvolari*.

Marco Tirelli (1956). They all belonged to the same generation, having almost the same age, and most of them had been attending the course of scenography held by Toti Scialoja (1914–1998) at the Academy in Rome.²²⁷



Figure 111 Gianfranco Notargiacomo, *Infinito, Universo e Mondo (Infinity, Universe, World)*, 1985, Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 200 x 300 cm, Rome, Private collection.

The name characterized not an artistic movement, but an artistic place. In fact, it referred to a former pasta factory, called Pastificio Cerere, located in the Roman district of San Lorenzo, which had been completely abandoned and then selected by artists and fellow students to set up their ateliers (fig. 112).²²⁸

²²⁷ Toti Scialoja was one of the most prominent abstract expressionists in Italy. In the 1950s he met his famous American colleagues, becoming a friend to some of them. At the Accademia delle Belle Arti in Rome he was also the teacher of all the major members of Arte Povera active in the capital: Mario Ceroli (1938), Pino Pascali (1935–1968) and Jannis Kounellis (1936).

²²⁸ Actually, there is no universal agreement on the name of the group. Some refer to it as 'San Lorenzo group' or 'School of San Lorenzo', from the name of the district; some call it 'Pastificio Cerere group', from the factory name; at last, others use the expression 'Via degli Ausoni group', from the name of the street where the factory is located.



Figure 112 Vintage photo of Pastificio Cerere, San Lorenzo district, Rome.

Between 1973 and 1981 each of the six artists occupied a space in the building.²²⁹ With a common, leftist background, they created a community, almost a self-managed social centre, living together, sharing their art and ideas. San Lorenzo was a working-class neighbourhood, one of the few industrial areas in Rome that had been bombed during WWII. Also the site somehow had a political connotation, which, again, was an unusual element for the artistic groups of the 1980s.

The Pastificio Cerere factory (the name is the Italian for Ceres, goddess of agriculture) was the oldest of the three major factories in the San Lorenzo district. Founded in 1905, it kept producing pasta until 1959. For further information, visit <http://www.pastificiocerere.it/>, last access on 01.04.2015.

²²⁹ In 1973, Nunzio was the first one who established his studio in the former Pastificio Cerere, at the fourth floor of the building, followed in 1977 by Gallo and Dessì. Later, Ceccobelli and Tirelli occupied the third floor of the building and Pizzi Cannella was the last one to join, in 1981, at first hosted by Nunzio.

Domenico Bianchi (1955), who can be considered as a seventh member of the group even if from an outer position, since he never moved to the factory, introduced Dessì, Gallo and Ceccobelli to the important Roman gallerist Ugo Ferranti. They had their first exhibition in 1978, followed by many others in Europe and New York.²³⁰ Since 1984, Nunzio, Pizzi Cannella and Tirelli were represented by another great Roman gallery, *L'Attico*, managed by Fabio Sargentini (1939).²³¹



Figure 113 Giuseppe Gallo and Francesca Woodman, 1978 photo by Francesca Woodman.

²³⁰ The first exhibition at Ugo Ferranti gallery in 1978 gathered works by Bruno Ceccobelli, Gianni Dessì, Giuseppe Gallo, Angelo Ségneri and Francesca Woodman. Francesca Woodman (1958–1981) was an acclaimed American photographer known for her black and white pictures featuring herself and female models, who killed herself at the age of 22. Fig. 113 shows a famous photo of hers, where she portrayed herself together with Giuseppe Gallo.

²³¹ The gallery *L'Attico* was founded by Fabio Sargentini and his father Bruno in 1957. In 1967 it first presented Pino Pascali and Jannis Kounellis. The Greek-origin artist was the protagonist of the most legendary episode in the history of the gallery, and one of the most famous exhibitions connected to *Arte Povera*. In 1969 Kounellis exhibited the work entitled *Cavalli*, consisting of twelve living horses in the gallery's new location in an old garage in Beccaria Street. The gallery had re-opened in 1969 in such a new location, after that Sargentini, shocked by Pascali's tragic death in a car crash, had closed the previous one in 1968. The gallery was not only for visual art, as in 1969 minimal composers Terry Riley (1935) and La Monte Young (1935) were presented.

1984 was the key year for the group. Since 1980, Achille Bonito Oliva had been promoting Transavantgarde through a series of exhibitions aimed at demonstrating the connection between his group and other artists in Italy and Europe. The San Lorenzo artists had exhibited in many of these events, so that Bonito Oliva was well aware of their works. In 1984, the critic organized the exhibition *Ateliers*, where the artists of the Pastificio Cerere had to open their studios to the public. The visitors were therefore allowed not only to see some works of theirs, but also to see the place where the works had been produced and where the artists were actually living. The pasta factory became a very important cultural site in Rome, attracting dealers and curators; the San Lorenzo group got introduced into the international art scene. Bonito Oliva's texts about the group were always very vague and his major worry seemed to be minimizing its profound dialectics with Transavantgarde. The critic was indeed very important to determine the international success of the San Lorenzo artists in the short run, while his presence was probably negative in the long run. In fact, having been introduced to a wider public by the critic of Transavantgarde and even some years after the boom of such a movement, the San Lorenzo group has always been perceived as a later derivation of Transavantgarde. In common Italian art history books it can be still read of "the 'second and third generation' of Transavantgarde", with reference to the San Lorenzo artists.²³² Bonito Oliva himself in his art history compendium labelled Nunzio and Gallo as artists "of the new generation".²³³ This was curious, since they were as old as De Maria and only two years younger than Clemente.

The main characteristics of the San Lorenzo artists that made them so different from Transavantgarde and other contemporary experiences were: their lack of interest for the art of the past and any explicit form of citationism; their strong interest for materials that led to works, where the distinction between painting

²³² VV. AA. 2006 VV.AA., *La storia dell'Arte. Vol. 18. L'Arte contemporanea*; Milan, Electa, 2006, p. 492.

²³³ Argan/Bonito Oliva 2002 Giulio Carlo Argan, Achille Bonito Oliva, *L'Arte moderna, 1770-1970. L'Arte oltre il Duemila*; Milan, Sansoni/RCS Libri, 2002, p. 329.

and sculpture was impossible to establish; their initial choice of using very few colours. The composition of the group had not been imposed by a critic, but each artist had chosen one another; thus, the group was very cohesive and the works produced in the early years could be seen as a whole corpus, even if each artist had his own strong personality and individuality. It was probably the last, true avant-garde in Italy still progressively looking for something new, convinced of the inner strength of images and of the miraculous power of art.



Figure 114 Bruno Ceccobelli, *Loggia (Lodge)*, 1979, Ink on sheet, clay and brass, 220 x 110 cm, Groningen, Groninger Museum.

The quality of the artists was amazing and even if, as the years passed by, each of them followed independent paths, they continued producing very interesting works, aging far better than many of their contemporaries.



Figure 115 Bruno Ceccobelli, *Cervo umido (Wet Deer)*, 1985, Oil, watercolour and wax on wood, 255 x 208 cm, Rome, UniCredit Group Collection.

Ceccobelli, a connoisseur of alchemy, introduced a lot of symbols belonging to different cultures in his assemblages of different, re-used materials. He

avoided industrial colours, in favour of natural ones (fig. 114 and fig. 115). He was deeply convinced that Beauty would have saved the World.

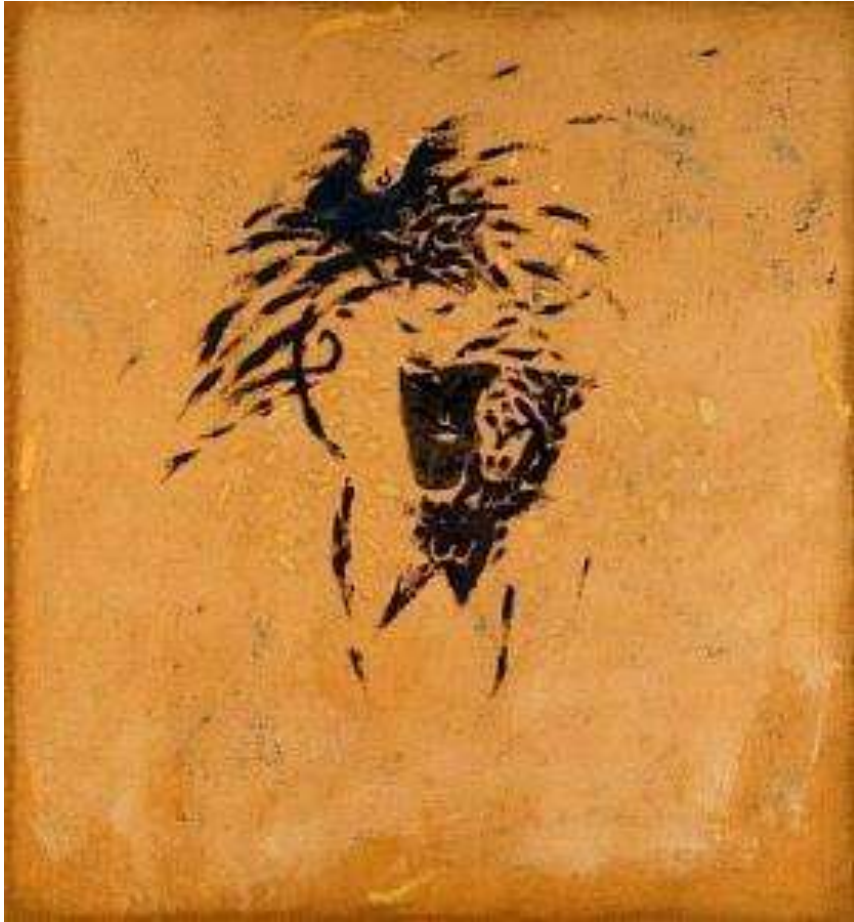


Figure 116 Gianni Dessì, *Untitled*, 1980, Oil and collage on canvas, 140 x 130 cm, Paris, Auction at Artcurial in 2008.

Gianni Dessì experimented with different techniques, but his trademark was with no doubt the always-eventful centre of his images. In his works, the centre played the role of the vanishing point in linear perspective; it was “a force opposing entropy” (fig 116 and fig. 117).²³⁴ From 1983, he started using

²³⁴ Translated by the author from Lancioni 2009 Daniela Lancioni, *Gli artisti di San Lorenzo: Ceccobelli, Dessì, Gallo, Nunzio, Pizzi Cannella e Tirelli*, in: *Italia Contemporanea. Officina San Lorenzo*, ed. by Daniela Lancioni; Milan, Silvana Editoriale, 2009, p. 36.

colours in a more extensive way, especially the primary ones and in particular cadmium yellow.²³⁵



Figure 117 Gianni Dessi, *Quadrivio (Quadrivium)*, 1983, Oil and Japanese paper collage on burlap, 240 x 190 cm, London, Auction at Sotheby's in 2007.

Giuseppe Gallo has constantly searched for equilibrium, balancing the different elements introduced in his works. These were rings, silhouettes, spears, leaves and animals, sometimes hardly visible (fig. 118). He initially used watercolours, then oil; later he discovered wax and encaustic.

Nunzio produced his early sculptures in gypsum alabaster, employing unusual techniques and juxtaposing different elements, which he immersed in watercolours, to get an unpredictable unity. Then, he hung the sculptures on the wall, “disarming sculpture of force of gravity”, so that the beholder had to look at them as pictures, in some way reversing the position made by

²³⁵ The EU's Chemical Agency is considering a ban on pigments containing the chemical Cadmium to prevent it entering the water course; Dessi's art would have significant impacts from that.

Minimalists in the 1960s (fig. 119).²³⁶ In 1986 Nunzio started using wood, painted with natural colours made of coal, pitch or lead. The black painting seemed to deprive the sculptures of part of their weight (fig. 120).



Figure 118 Giuseppe Gallo, *Incantato (Enchanted)*, 1983, Oil on canvas, 178 x 135 cm, Rome, Calabresi Collection.

²³⁶ Gabriella Drudi made the quoted statement in the catalogue for the exhibition *Nunzio Di Stefano* held at Galleria Spazio in Bolzano in 1981. Quoted in Lancioni 2009 (cf. note 234), p. 41.

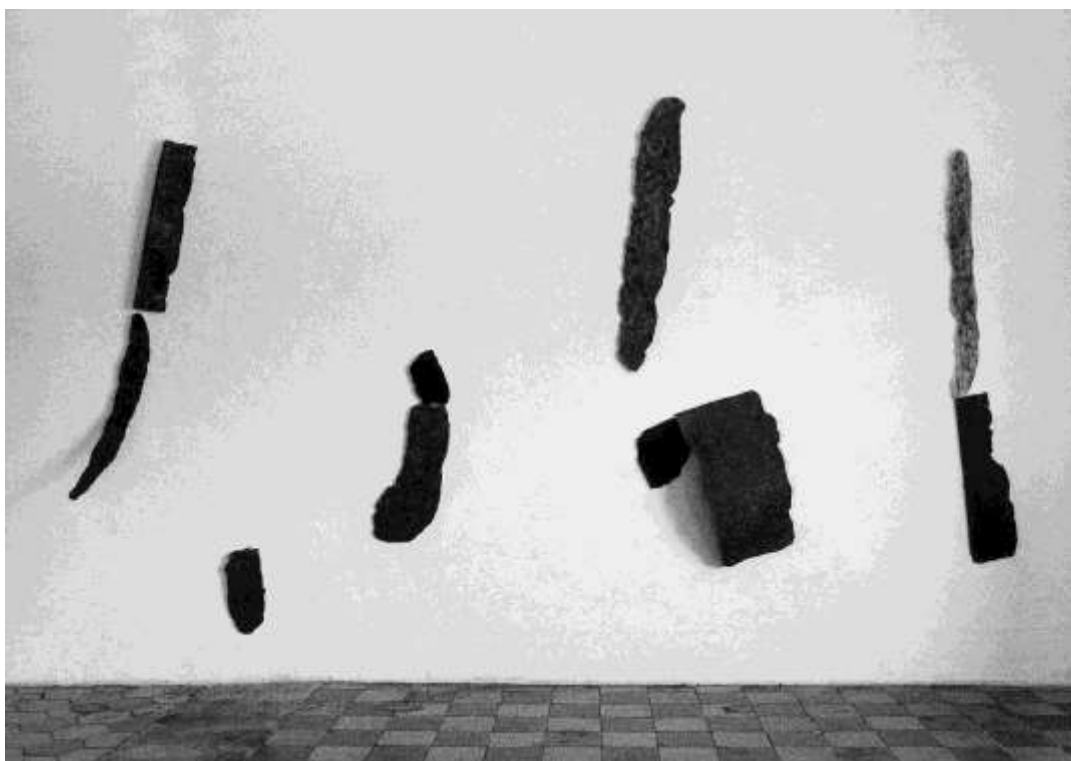


Figure 119 Nunzio, *Quarto ponte (Fourth Bridge)*, 1980, No further details available.



Figure 120 Nunzio, *Meteora (Meteor)*, 1986, pitch and colour on wood, 194 x 174 x 20 cm, Rome, Fabio Sargentini collection.

Before joining the group, Pizzi Cannella had been close to anachronists. Later, he started producing pictorial cycles with a minimal palette mainly composed of black and umber (fig. 121). One of the main themes of his works, always containing repeated, recognizable forms characterized by a primitive force, was the contraposition between light and darkness (fig. 122).



Figure 121 Piero Pizzi Cannella, *Bella coppia (Beautiful Couple)*, 1983, Oil on canvas, 170 x 150 cm, Rome, Archivio Pizzi Cannella.

Marco Tirelli used a palette as poor as Pizzi Cannella's, but his work was minimal in a broader sense. A strong observer, Tirelli liked cataloguing forms in his paintings (fig. 123). Such forms, often geometrical and taken from architectural elements, were repeated from different points of view or changing their position (fig. 124).



Figure 122 Piero Pizzi Cannella, *Tutte le stelle del cielo* (*All the stars in the sky*), 1985, Oil on canvas, 260 x 360 cm, Rome, Fabio Sargentini collection.

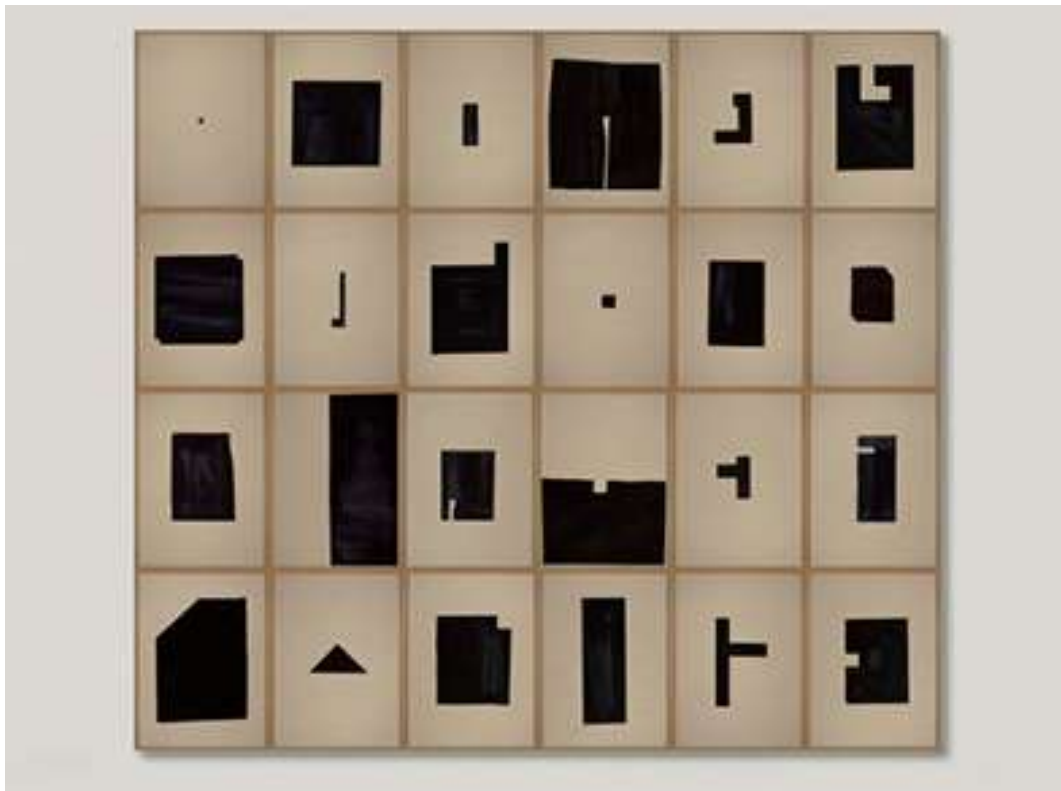


Figure 123 Marco Tirelli, *Senza titolo* (*Untitled*), 1980, Ink on paper, 24 elements, 70 x 50 cm each, Rome, Artist's collection.



Figure 124 Marco Tirelli, *Senza titolo (Untitled)*, 1986, Acrylic on panel, 54.8 x 91 cm, Rome, Farsettiarte, Auction #164.

5.3 Astrazione Povera

Astrazione Povera (Poor Abstraction) was a movement, whose founding theory was developed by Filiberto Menna between 1982 and 1985. The components of this group were Gianni Asdrubali (1955), Antonio Capaccio (1956), Bruno Querci (1956), Lucia Romualdi (?), Mariano Rossano (1955) and Rocco Salvia (1953). It had a short life and no great success. This was due to many reasons, including the fact that Menna passed away in 1989. His idea was basically to react against the dominant inclination for neo-expressionism. While most of the artworks of the period were full of colours and figurative, these artists, on the contrary, were using only black, white and some gradation of grey to produce abstract paintings. Bob Venturi had killed Modernism and opened the season of Postmodernism.²³⁷ According to Menna it was time for the modernist motto "Less is more" to rule again. In fact, the

²³⁷ See the Introduction to the present work, section 1.3.

most important exhibition of Astrazione Povera, held in Erice in 1986, had a title that in Italian is something equivalent to this motto: *Il Meno è il più*. The text written by Menna for the exhibition catalogue was the most comprehensive theoretical essay to understand this artistic movement. The critic from Salerno started from a metaphor having a literary origin. Menna referred to James' novel *The Sense of the Past*.²³⁸ In it, an artist called Ralph had discovered the way to time travel through painting, but he was not able to return to his present afterwards.

It seems to me that the situation in which Ralph finds himself can be taken as an emblematic condition of a state of things that concerns the Art of these past years, fascinated and, I would say, hypnotized by the past to the point of placing it, although in different ways, at the centre of self-reflection and self-experience. However, James' painter at least realizes at the end that he is no longer living in the present...

*Many artists today want to come out of this condition of subjection, contrasting the longing for the past to an artistic experience, once again, understood as a search and a construction of the new.*²³⁹

Such a construction was only possible through a reaction against the dominant terms of the time: 'dissemination', 'nomadism', 'dispersion', 'eclecticism', 'anachronism', 'citationism' and many other similar ones.²⁴⁰

*The art work is not the place of citationism, of fairy-tales or of the immediate expression of the subject, but the point of arrival of a process that was born and has developed with internal coherence, based on a change of accent from the semantic to the syntactic dimension.*²⁴¹

²³⁸ *The Sense of the Past* is an unfinished novel by the American author Henry James (1843–1916) that was published in 1917, a year after his death.

²³⁹ Menna 1986 Filiberto Menna, *The Least is the Most. For a Poor Abstraction*; Milan, Mazzotta, 1986, p. 9.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 10–12.

²⁴¹ Ibid., p. 12.



Figure 125 Gianni Asdrubali, *Giallo (Yellow)*, 1989, Acrylic on canvas, 98.5 x 71.5 cm, Turin, Author's collection.

The use of the adjective '*Povera*' was a little suspicious, since the same term had been so successful for Germano Celant; anyway, it referred to artists adopting reduction and minimal tools to express themselves.

Although these theoretical premises and the statement that these artists "want to avoid the practice of citationism and [...] clearly reject yesterday's most frequented path", their actual works were saying something different.²⁴² Capaccio was looking at the past in his motif of draperies quoted from ancient statues or paintings. In many works by Rossano other authors, such as Clyfford Still (1904–1980), could be recognized. Rocco Salvia's works were clearly influenced by Arshile Gorky (1904–1948). Contradictory enough, Menna himself admitted these citations. Within this group, only Querci and

²⁴² Ibid.

Asdrubali continued a respectable artistic career. The latter was indeed one of the most interesting painters of his generation.²⁴³

Gianni Asdrubali did manage in refusing any citation, in order to search for something new. In a way his technique could remind of action painting, since Asdrubali seemed every time to have a fight with the canvas. He was trying to get a new space, a new image out of the void (fig. 125).

5.4 New Futurism

Nuovo Futurismo (New Futurism) was a movement born in 1984 and composed of eleven artists.²⁴⁴ They were promoted by Milanese gallerist Luciano Inga Pin; Renato Barilli was the most active critic, who wrote about them. The name referred to the most important Italian avant-garde of the 20th century, Futurism, which had had two distinct phases. The New Futurists were looking at the second Futurism, born around the years of WWI, after the death of Umberto Boccioni (1882–1916). In that period, the heart of the movement had moved from Milan to Rome, while Giacomo Balla (1871–1958) and Fortunato Depero (1892–1960) became the leading figures. One of the key characteristics of the original movement was the fact that its members were experimenting in every medium, including applied arts, advertisement and industrial design. The New Futurists employed the most advanced technologies and materials (i.e. fiberglass, industrial paints, synthetic fibres, etc.) to produce colourful, ludic, neo-pop objects very close to industrial design (fig. 126). They had a particular meeting of minds with Depero and his research in interior design, theatre and advertisement that resulted in playful works full of colours. In a similar manner, the New Futurists tried and pursued

²⁴³ For instance, Enrico Castellani (1930) made flattering comments on Gianni Asdrubali when in 2000 they exhibited together at Studio Invernizzi in Milan.

²⁴⁴ In alphabetical order, they were: Gianantonio Abate (1955), Clara Bonfiglio (1959), Dario Brevi (1955), Gianni Cella (1953), Andrea Crosa (1949), Innocente (1948), Marco Lodola (1955), Battista Luraschi (1951), Luciano Palmieri (1951), Plumcake (collective name chosen by Romolo Pallotta, 1954 and Claudio Ragni, 1955), Umberto Postal (1949).

new paths, questioning the traditional forms of art. Somehow, this attitude was one of the reasons why this group did not ever really boom: as artists practicing minor arts, they were taken less seriously. Nevertheless, in their provincial way, the New Futurists anticipated solutions of stars-to-be, such as Jeff Koons (1955) or Takashi Murakami (1962).

The movement was in a certain continuity with Nuovi-nuovi, as the presence of Barilli could ratify; it was almost a second generation, with similar premises, but more technology-oriented.



Figure 126 Dario Brevi, *Caffè forte (Strong coffee)*, 1984, Acrylic on MDF, further details not available.

6. Market Analysis

According to the latest TEFAF Art Market Report, in 2014 the market share of Italy for global art represented 0.8% of the global market and 2.5% of the European Union market, marking a slight decrease from 2013, when Italy held 1% and 3% of the respective market segments. Mostly due to the bad economic cycle, the average auction prices dropped from € 23,247 in 2007, the second highest value in the European Union after the United Kingdom, to € 6,417 in 2011, the lowest value in Europe and equal to less than one third of the European average. Moreover, the median price in Italy in 2013 was € 1,484, the lowest level amongst the countries having a developed market, while the global market median price was € 7,090. All these data speak to a depressed art market in Italy. The reasons for that are many and too complex to be analysed here. Included among them however are the country's heavy regulatory environment, the highest level of VAT in Europe on art purchases and the complicated bureaucratic process for obtaining an exportation permit.

As a consequence, the Italian artists achieving important results at auctions are praised at an international level. Italian artists usually have a local market characterized by very low prices; in case, for any reason, they get an international exposure and good results in the global market, they completely change their market values, also locally.²⁴⁵ As far as Italian art of the 1980s is concerned, only the Transavantgarde artists, who are well-known internationally, have a level of prices comparable to major non-Italian artists of the period. The statistics for the five Italian artists are reported in Table 1.²⁴⁶ Their best benchmark is Julian Schnabel, who had a similar style and often exhibited in the same shows. His record price is USD 750,000, hammered in May 2013. It is a value not far from the highest values obtained by Clemente

²⁴⁵ The EMAMS students had the opportunity to attend the Italian Sales at Christie's, London, on 16.10.14, where some record prices were hammered. Even better results were achieved the following day at Sotheby's. Visiting his house on 19 October, art dealer and curator Kenny Schachter (1961) commented: "The results of some marginal Italian artists have completely changed the values and perspective of the Italian art market."

²⁴⁶ All data are taken from ARTPRICE 2015 ARTPRICE, web page, 2015, <http://www.artprice.com/>, last access 30.04.15.

and Cucchi. However, it has to be acknowledged that, unlike Schnabel's, all the record prices summarized in Table 1 belong to the period before the economic crisis. It seems that the market for Italian Transavantgarde has not recovered yet.

ARTIST	RANKING 2014	TURNOVER 2014	GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION	Record prize	Technique	Date	Size	Date of the auction
Sandro Chia	3021	USD 289,449	45% Italy	USD 427,686	Oil on canvas	1981	194.9x259.7	2007
Francesco Clemente	3376	USD 245,344	41% United Kingdom	USD 627,732	Mixed media	1984	127.5x214.0	2006
Enzo Cucchi	7001	USD 83,133	43% United Kingdom	USD 922,250	Oil on canvas	1980	202.0x205.0	2006
Nicola De Maria	2944	USD 299,172	66% Italy	USD 250,635	Oil on canvas	1989	195.0x260.0	2006
Mimmo Paladino	1345	USD 863,885	44% Italy	USD 247,380	Mixed media	1995	325.1x224.2	2005

Table 1 Market data for the Transavantgarde artists.

In the meantime, an urban legend circulated that powerful art dealer and speculator Charles Saatchi (1943) had destroyed Chia's career after a quarrel with him, by flooding the market with 23 of his paintings.²⁴⁷ The protagonists lowered the importance of the event and corrected some reported details, nevertheless, whether true or false, the rumour cursed the market for the artist.

The market sees these artists as connected to a movement, so bad times for one of them usually means bad times for the whole group. Looking at the hedonic index produced for the group, a value of 100 in 2004 reached a peak of 138 in 2008, progressively decreasing to a quite stable value of 127 between 2013 and 2014 (fig. 127).²⁴⁸ Still experiencing a negative slope, the curve could soon start increasing again. Given the values of the American

²⁴⁷ Kinsella 2009 Eileen Kinsella, *Saatchi's answers raise questions*; New York, Art News, 2009, available at <http://www.artnews.com/>, last access 30.04.15.

²⁴⁸ As explained by expert Fabian Bocart, founder of the Brussels-based Tutela Capital, during his EMAMS lecture on 12.12.2014, hedonic art indices are an econometric tool developed in order to understand the market and value the works of a given author or movement, considering all the available data and correcting all the differentiating factors typical of non-fungible goods. The indices presented in the present work were produced using systems provided by Tutela Capital during the aforementioned lecture, for a didactic purpose. Such indices are shown here with no commercial intent and Tutela Capital has no responsibility on their use. For further information on the company, visit www.tutela.net.

competitors, Transavanguardia could prove to be a good opportunity for investment.

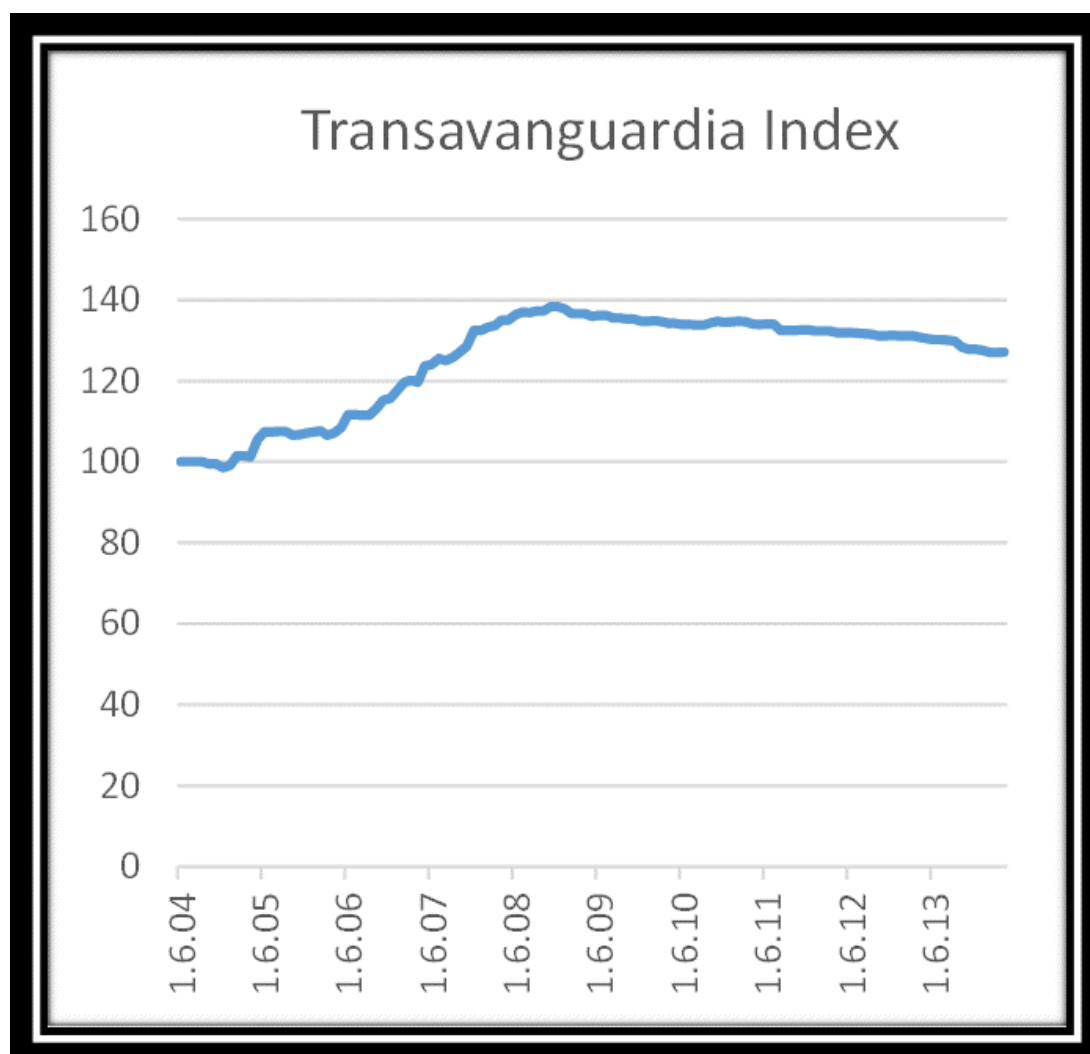


Figure 127 Hedonic index for Transavantgarde, 2004-2013.

As shown in Table 2, the level of prices reached by works belonging to the Nuovi-nuovi group is very low.²⁴⁹ Only the three best representatives have some works exchanged outside of Italy, while the other artists have a completely local market. This could be a good opportunity for investment, gambling on the possibility that some international interest focuses on their potential. Ontani's record price, only USD 52,000 is ridiculously low for the importance of the artist. The record price for one of his photos is about USD

²⁴⁹ Cf. note 246.

32,000, while it is USD 5,900,000 for Cindy Sherman's and USD 55,000 for Morimura's. It is likely that sooner or later the market will recognize that Ontani is a better artist than Morimura and that the spread with the level of prices reached by Sherman is far too wide.

ARTIST	RANKING 2014	TURNOVER 2014	GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION	Record prize	Technique	Date	Size	Date of the auction
Luigi Ontani	4067	USD 187,098	76% Italy	USD 52,832	Watercolour on paper	Undated	238.0x152.0	2013
Salvo	3077	USD 282,611	85% Italy	USD 101,830	Oil on canvas	1989	200x149.5	2007
Luciano Bartolini	10911	USD 40,271	78% Italy	USD 24,890	Oil on canvas	1988	D. 154	2014
Enzo Eposito	30825	USD 5,774	91% Italy	USD 9,177	Mixed media on board	2007	150.0x100.0	2012
Marcello Jori	27550	USD 7,346	100% Italy	USD 11,050	Oil on canvas	Undated	125.0x110.0	2008
Aldo Spoldi	26332	USD 8,054	96% Italy	USD 6,303	Oil on canvas	1992	60.0x100.0	2006

Table 2 Market data for the Nuovi-nuovi artists.

Looking at the hedonic index produced for the group, a value of 100 in 2004 reached a peak of 130.5 in 2008, then it decreased to 121.5 and started a positive trend again in 2014 (fig. 128).²⁵⁰

Considering only the two big names of Ontani and Salvo, the curve has a similar shape, but the values are slightly different: the peak is at 135.6 and the lowest value is 125. It confirms a general, maybe obvious rule that the masters of a movement are a better investment compared to their companions: their values have less inertia in increasing and more inertia in decreasing.

²⁵⁰ Cf. note 248.

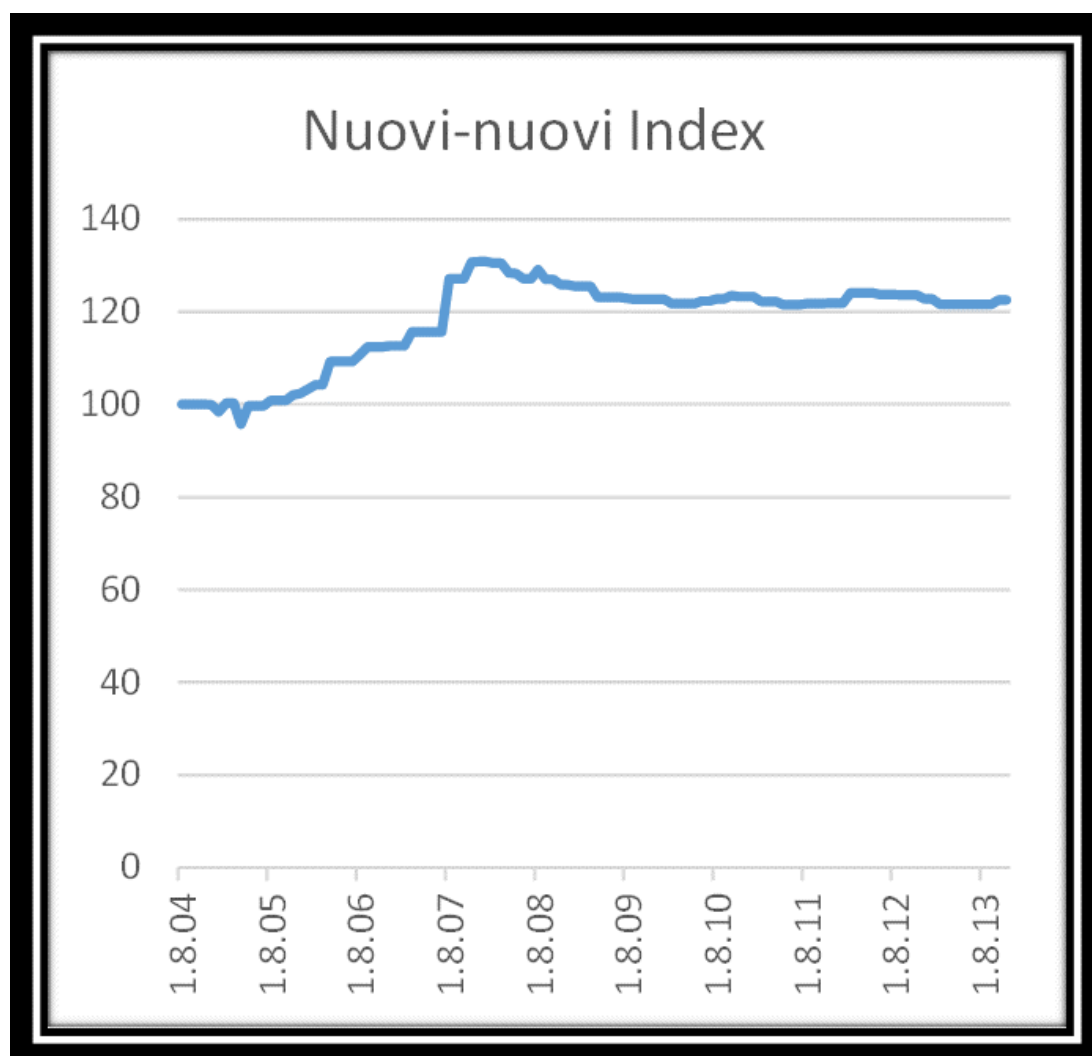


Figure 128 Hedonic index for Nuovi-nuovi, 2004-2013.

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